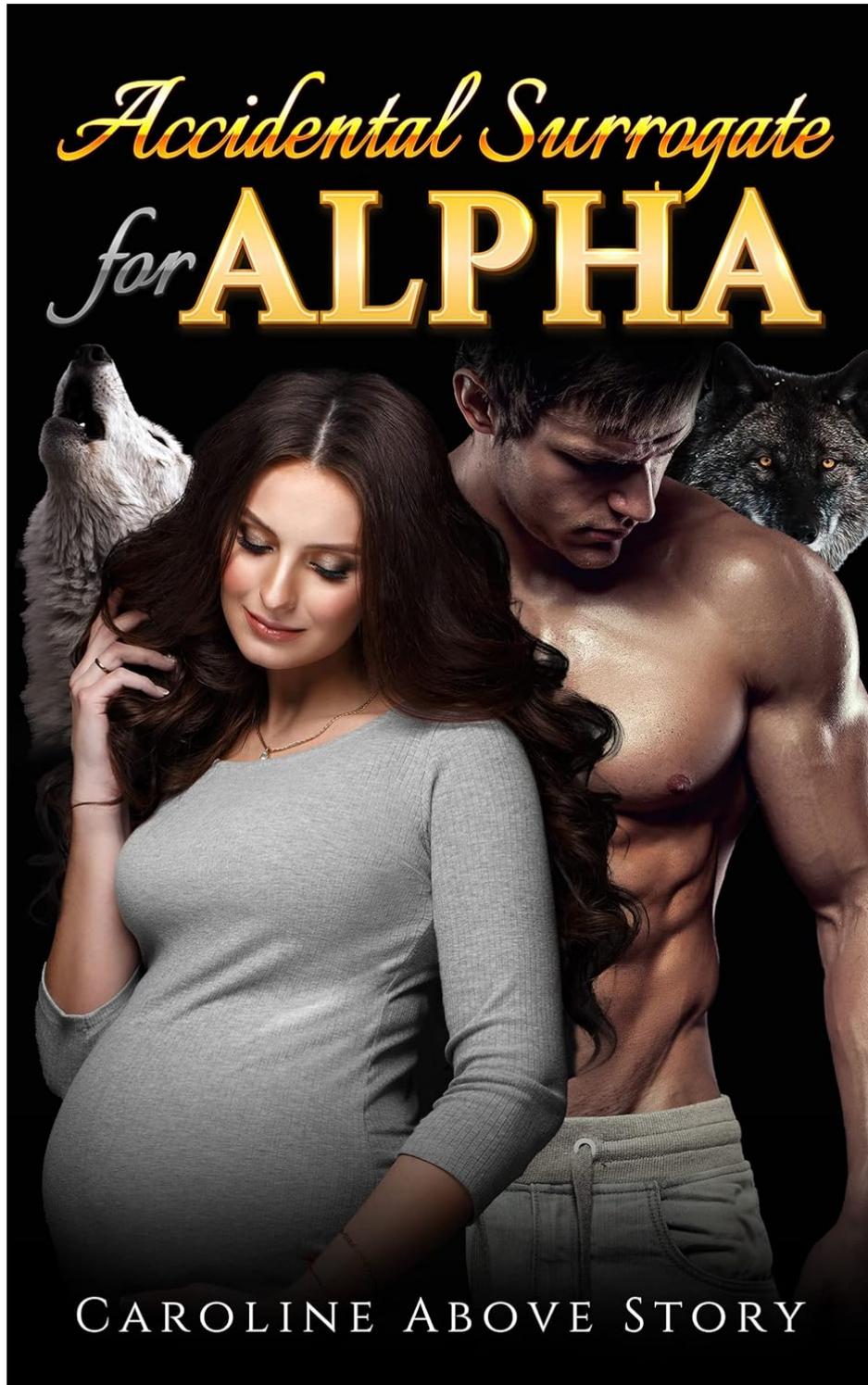


Accidental Surrogate for Alpha



Chapter 1 – Betray

Ella

“I’m sorry Ella.” My physician says gently. “I’m afraid you have very few viable eggs remaining. Frankly, I normally see these numbers in women ten or fifteen years your senior.”

“What?” I murmur, not believing my ears. I’ve been trying to get pregnant for years. I’m only 30, I should have plenty of eggs left.

“In terms of fertility, you have very little time left.” She continues. “If you want to conceive, you need to do so before your next cycle begins.”

“My next cycle?” I repeat, my mouth hanging open in shock. I love kids more than anything, and though it might not be everyone’s ambition, I want nothing more than to be a mother.

I have to get home and tell my boyfriend this news, and there’s not a moment to waste.

I make it home in record time, bursting through the door and opening my mouth to call for Mike, but stopping dead in my tracks. As soon as I walk inside I see a pair of high heels and a handbag by the door — neither of which belong to me.

Even if I could find a man willing to have a baby with me in time, I’m not eager to trust anyone after Mike’s betrayal. I’m going to have to do this on my own, and I know Cora can help me. I don’t have much money, but I have enough savings to pay for the insemination, especially since I basically have one shot and one shot only.

When I arrive, all my plans to lay out my situation for Cora clearly and concisely go out the window, because the moment I see my sister I fall to pieces. She hugs and kisses me until my tears subside, slowly extracting the story from me piece by piece. When she hears about Mike and Kate she swears up a storm, but that’s nothing compared to her reaction when I explain about my fertility.

“That little shit! I’ll kill him!” She fumes, studying me with a worried expression. “Ella, if your doctor was right this means you only have one chance to conceive.”

“I know.” I sniffle. “And if this is going to be my only baby, I don’t want to take any chances. I want the best donor we can find.”

“Don’t you worry about that.” Cora assures me, “We’ve got donations from actors, models, scientists — it’s only the creme de la creme here.” She glances at the door and lowers her voice. “You didn’t hear it from me, but even Dominic Sinclair sent his samples here for testing.”

"Dominic Sinclair? I repeat, "the billionaire?" I've seen the man around town, but we don't exactly run in the same circles. He lives in the same neighborhood as my wealthy employer and often says hello to the children I nanny, but he's always surrounded by bodyguards and is so intimidating I get goosebumps just thinking about him.

"Oh my god." Cora slaps her hand over her mouth. "I wasn't supposed to tell you that! I don't know what I was thinking. Apparently he's no stranger to fertility issues himself, and he trusted us to handle his swimmers over every other lab in the country. I've got his sperm in the other room at this very moment." She frets, "But Ella you can't tell anyone, you have to promise me."

"Of course!" I agree immediately. "I know how important confidentiality is here."

"Thank you," Cora breathes. "Now, I'm going to give you a dossier of our clients so you can pick a donor, and once you've chosen we'll get you knocked up before you can even blink."

It's not an easy decision, but eventually I choose a handsome surgeon whose photo practically makes me swoon. Cora leaves the room only long enough to prepare the sample, and though she looks a bit flustered when she returns, she quickly and professionally completes the insemination, holding my hand when the procedure is finished. "It's all take care of now, Ella." She promises, "You can come back in ten days to see if it worked."

Ten days. I think dazedly. Ten days to decide my entire future.

If only I'd known that by the time those ten days were up, my future would no longer belong to me — but to Dominic Sinclair himself.

Chapter 2 – Be Fired

Ella

Six days to go.

I think, staring at the date circled on my calendar.

Six days until I find out if my dreams are finally going to come true... or if I have to figure out an entirely different plan for my life.

I've thought about nothing else since Cora inseminated me last week, I'm so anxious to find out if I'm pregnant I haven't even begun to process Mike's betrayal.

I'm trying to keep a level head, yet I can't help but imagine my future with this new baby. Try as I might, I catch myself daydreaming about it constantly. I even find myself humming as I get ready for work in the morning.

When I arrive at my employer's estate in the most exclusive neighborhood in Moon Valley – which basically makes it the most exclusive neighborhood in the world, since Moon Valley is one of the most expensive cities on the planet – I'm immediately greeted by two little voices shouting my name in excitement. "Ella!"

The next thing I know, 3-year-old Millie is hugging my legs while her older brother, Jake, wraps his arms around my middle. "Good morning love puddles!" I exclaim, returning their hugs. "Are you ready for the museum?"

"Yeah!" They cheer, racing out the door without even stopping to put on coats. It takes a bit of wrangling to get them back inside and bundled up for the cold winter day, but before long we set out into the snow.

Jake races ahead of Millie and I, impatient to get to the science museum and not seeming to notice that his sister's tiny legs simply don't move that fast. Chuckling, I lift Millie into my arms and settle her on my hip. "Goodness, you're getting too big for this, munchkin."

"Nuh-uh," Millie grins, "You're just too little."

She might have a point. At five foot one, I don't exactly have the kind of build suited to heavy lifting. I'm in great shape, but I've never been particularly strong. "Smarty pants." I tease, laughing with the little girl.

When I look back towards Jake, I realize he's stopped a few feet ahead of us. My heart skips a beat when I realize why. We're in front of the Sinclair mansion, and its owner is currently standing in the middle of the sidewalk, his gaze searing me like a firebrand as I

approach with Millie. Dominic Sinclair is just about the most handsome man I've ever seen, but he's also one of the most terrifying.

With dark hair and piercing green eyes, chiseled features and a body so muscular I could swoon, it doesn't seem fair he gets to look so good and also be so rich. If I didn't know better I might think it was his wealth or imposing height that makes him so intimidating, after all he's at least six foot four, which means he towers over me and everyone else around him. However it's neither of those things, there's simply an indefinable quality about the man that I can't put my finger on, one which screams

danger

. He gives off this energy that's so raw and animalistic one forgets there's anyone else in the room.

Taking a steadying breath, I close the distance between us so Millie can say hello. When she greets him, Dominic drags his attention from me and offers her a smile so genuine that it tugs at my heartstrings. As I watch him talk to my two young charges, I remember what Cora told me about his infertility struggles. He clearly loves children, and I feel a wave of empathy for him. If anyone knows what it's like to yearn for a family of their own, it's me.

Jake is currently showing Dominic his new toy airplane, pulling the matchbox model from his pocket and demonstrating how far it can fly. With a great heave, he sends the toy gliding through the air, only to land in the middle of the street. Before any of us can say a word, Jake races after it, right into the busy road.

"Jake no, be careful!" I cry, watching him dart out into the path of an oncoming car but feeling frozen by my fear. Before I can contemplate putting Millie down to go after him, a blur of movement whirrs past my vision. I've never seen anyone move so fast in my life. Dominic became little more than a hazy outline of himself, chasing after Jake and pulling him out of the way just before the car slams into them. The vehicle's tires are still screeching when Dominic sets Jake down beside me, his expression suddenly very stern.

"That was very dangerous." He scolds gently. "You should never go into the street without looking both ways first."

Jake hangs his head. "I'm sorry, I didn't want my plane to get runned over."

"You are a million times more important than a toy." Dominic tells him firmly, "and you scared your nanny half to death."

"I'm sorry, Ella." Jake sniffles, looking up at me with wide eyes.

"I know sweetheart, just don't ever do that again." I breathe, cuddling him against my side. "Thank you so much." I say to Dominic, feeling more grateful than I can express. "I have no idea how you moved so fast! It was like something out of a superhero film."

"Must have been the adrenaline." Dominic shrugs, giving Millie another smile before taking his leave. "Enjoy the rest of your day, and stay out of the road young man!"

"Yes sir!" Jake calls after him, pocketing his airplane. "I really am sorry." He adds to me.

"It's forgotten." I tell him softly, though I take his hand so that he can't run off again.

"It all happened so fast." I tell Cora later that night. "I mean the more I think about it, the more amazing it seems. One moment he was there, and the next he was gone. It was like magic."

"Thank goodness Jake is alright." She replies, but rather than looking relieved, her face is twisted into a deep grimace.

Studying my sister's expression, I realize her grim demeanor is not just about Jake's near miss. Something else is wrong, and I actually feel guilty for not noticing sooner. "Is everything okay?"

Cora frowns, "Not really. But you've got so much going on right now, it's not important."

"Cora, don't be ridiculous." I admonish. "What's going on?"

"Well, speaking of Dominic Sinclair," She begins cryptically, "you know that sperm he sent to us for testing?"

"Yeah," I confirm, wondering where on earth this was going.

"It's gone missing... and I'm the last person who saw it, not to mention it was in my custody." She explains, her voice becoming thick with emotion. "Ella, I think... I think I'm going to be fired. And if there's an investigation I could lose my medical license."

"What?" I exclaim. "What do you mean it's missing? A vial of sperm can't just get up and walk away."

"I know, I think someone had to steal it, but there's no way of knowing who's responsible. And it looks like I'm going to have to take the blame." She shares, her eyes shining with tears.

"Cora, I can't believe you didn't tell me this sooner!" I lament, "They can't fire you, it isn't

fair.”

“You don’t understand, Dominic is one of our biggest donors.” Cora explains. “And he’s furious, he basically wants my head on a platter.”

A week ago I might have believed there was no hope for Cora, but seeing how kind and understanding Dominic was with the kids today makes me wonder if he could really be so heartless. Surely if he understood that Cora would never be so irresponsible he’d show some leniency? I have to try and help her, I would do anything for my sister – even begging a ruthless billionaire for mercy.

Chapter 3 – Request

Ella

Three days to go. I repeat these words to myself as I walk down the street, still preoccupied with my possible pregnancy, even as I prepare to go to bat for my sister. In some ways it's a coping mechanism: I'm about to beg Dominic Sinclair to save Cora's job, and I need a comforting thought to help me get through this.

His bodyguards see me first, and I can see their mouths moving as they watch me move closer, no doubt notifying him of my presence. Approaching nervously behind Dominic, I wonder for the hundredth time if this is a mistake. Who am I to ask a favor from one of the most powerful men on the planet? Shaking myself, I tell the little voice in the back of my mind to shut up – this is for Cora. I might not be brave for myself, but I can be brave for her.

"Mr. Sinclair?" I ask hesitantly, feeling my heart pound violently against my ribcage.

He turns around and gazes imperiously down at me. "Yes?"

"I'm Ella Reina, I nanny for Jake and Millie Graves." I begin, gnawing on my lower lip.

His dark eyes catch on my mouth, and suddenly I feel like a frightened rabbit in front of a hungry wolf. "I know who you are, Ella." The sound of my name on his lips sends a shiver down my spine. He speaks the familiar syllables with so much purpose, as if they truly mean something to him.

"Oh... well, I don't mean to be impertinent, but I'm friends with Dr Cora Daniels..." As soon as I say her name, his expression closes off, and some unidentified emotion flashes in his eyes.

"She told me she's in trouble at work, and I know you're one of the bank's donors." I improvise. "I don't know what Cora is being accused of, but I'm sure she's innocent. She takes her job incredibly seriously, and she would never do anything to risk her career."

"And what do you expect me to do about it?" Dominic asks ominously. I can tell he doesn't believe my weak story, his body language has changed completely, and I can feel his rising anger vibrating in the air around us.

"I just thought... I hoped that if you had any sway there, you might be able to put in a good word for her." I finish, feeling color flood my cheeks. I'm both ashamed of myself for such a feeble attempt, but unsure how else to handle such a delicate topic. The last thing I want is to get Cora in even more trouble than before.

Dominic's jaw ticks as he watches me, and the voice in the back of my head urges me to

run for it. “From what I’ve heard, your friend made a very serious mistake, and the consequences have been more than appropriate. The best thing she can do now is take responsibility for her mistakes, not sending you to do her dirty work for her.”

“I – she didn’t, she doesn’t even know I’m here! I swear.” I plead.

“I’ve said all I’m going to say on this matter.” Dominic declares, turning away from me and striding into his house. The door slams shut behind him, and I’m left with his various bodyguards.

“You need to leave now, miss.” One of the men announces sharply.

“I can’t.” I moan, “he has to understand, she’s going to lose everything!”

“We’re not going to ask you again.” A second guard growls, a clear threat in his words.

“Please, she’s innocent.” I beg, “you have to –” before I can say anything more, the men grab me by the arms and begin trying to lead me off the property. Feeling truly desperate, I dig in my heels, deciding that my dignity is worth Cora’s entire future. “I’m begging you, if I could just talk to Mr. Sinclair.”

“You’ve already talked to him.” The first guard grumbles, “and frankly you’re lucky he was as generous to you as he was. Your friend clearly told you things she shouldn’t.”

The next thing I know, they’ve thrown me off the property and onto the sidewalk so forcefully that I lose my balance, tumbling to the ground as tears spark in my eyes. The iron gates slam shut behind me, and I have no choice but to slink off before I can embarrass myself further.

Of course, this was only the beginning of my misfortune. When I arrived at work the next day, I found that my keys no longer fit the locks on the front door. I knocked, overwhelmed with confusion, and a few minutes later the door swung open to reveal Jake and Millie’s furious mother.

“My keys aren’t working.” I tell her, wondering why she’s glaring at me so fiercely.

“They’re not meant to.” She answers coldly, “as of yesterday afternoon, your services were no longer required.”

“I... you’re firing me?” I squeak, not believing my ears. “Why?”

“We got a call from the neighbors.” She explains haughtily, “apparently you let Jake run into the road the other day where he was almost hit by a car! And then yesterday you were seen making a fool of yourself at Dominic Sinclair’s home – they said his

bodyguards had to drag you off the grounds like a common criminal.”

“That isn’t fair, that isn’t what happened!” I plead. “Jake through his toy into the road and ran after it, I didn’t let it happen, and what happened with Mr. Sinclair was a misunderstanding.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She hisses. “Now leave before I call the police.”

“Please, can’t I at least say goodbye to the kids?” I request, praying she’ll grant me this one kindness.

“I’m dialing.” She tells me simply, pulling her cell phone from her pocket.

“No!” I raise my palms in supplication, “It’s okay, I’ll go.”

For the second time this week, I find myself shamefully retreating through this opulent neighborhood with tears streaming down my face. What hurts even worse than losing my job is the fact I didn’t get to explain the situation to Jake and Millie, or see them one last time. I’m sure their mother will tell them horrible things about me, despite the fact that I’ve been lovingly raising for them for the last two years.

I know Dominic Sinclair is responsible for this. I don’t believe my ex-boss’s story about the neighbors for one moment. He clearly wanted to punish me, just like he’s having Cora punished. A rush of fury takes hold of me, and suddenly I wish I could punish him somehow. It’s not like me to be so vindictive, but right now it truly feels like my entire life is falling apart, and it’s partly his fault.

I spent all my money on the insemination, and without a job I have almost nothing. How am I ever going to afford to have a baby now? I guarantee I’m not going to get a good reference from Jake and Millie’s mother.

As if things weren’t already bad enough, when I return home I find a stack of bills in the mailbox and I don’t even recognize half the senders. I open them one by one, feeling my confusion and disbelief grow by the minute.

As I look at the stores on the breakdown of charges, my suspicion grows: they’re all Mike’s favorite places. Is it possible he did this behind my back? That he’s been hiding the bills from me for months... or years? I know he’ll deny it if I confront him, which leaves me only one option.

I have to call Kate. My former best friend might have betrayed me completely with her affair, but if anyone knows what Mike has been up to, it’s her.

Chapter 4 – Desperation

Ella

My hands are shaking as I dial Kate's number. Have I ever been this angry? If I have I certainly can't remember it now.

"Hello?" Kate answers almost immediately, using a sickly sweet tone that screams of fakeness.

"Kate?" I state bluntly. "Are you with Mike right now?"

There's a pregnant pause on the other end of the line, before she weakly responds, "What? Of course not."

"Come off it Kate, do you really think I don't know about your s**t?" I demand. "I'm not a complete idiot."

"Ella listen—" She begins, obviously gearing up to give me some sort of excuse.

"No, I don't even care about your little affair anymore – but I need to talk to him right now." I declare fiercely.

There's another pause, and then Kate's voice drops its innocent tone. "You don't care?" She repeats, sounding truly shocked. "You know I'm already pregnant?"

I wasn't prepared for that particular piece of news. I clench my hands into fists, feeling so furious I think I might actually break the phone with my tight grip, "And what, you think that's some sort of victory?" I bite.

"Does he know you're pregnant?" I ask sharply, "because a man who's so afraid of responsibility that he'd poison me for years is probably willing to do it to anyone."

"Well no, but he loves me, he would never –" She tried to explain.

"He loved me too once." I cut her off. "At least he said he did. It's amazing how charming he can be, considering what a bastard he truly is. How do you think he's going to support you and your child? He doesn't even have a job."

"Of course he does!" She objects, "He just didn't tell you about it because he didn't want you to bleed him dry. He's a stock broker."

"Oh Kate," I sigh, "Poor, gullible, stupid Kate. He's as much a stock broker as I am a wizard."

“Don’t talk to me like that! He’s got money, he lavishes it on me all the time!” She insists.

“With fraudulent credit cards he took out in my name!” I shout, losing my temper completely.

“What?” She squeaks.

“That’s right. I’ve only just found out – he’s completely bankrupted me. I’m calling the police and if I were you, I’d check your own credit rating immediately, because I’d be willing to be you’re next.” I snap.

“No,” she repeats weakly, “you’re wrong, it’s different with me.”

My voice is getting thick with emotion now, but I can’t help it. “And frankly I don’t really care what happens to you Kate, but if you’re really pregnant then your baby deserves better than to be raised in a homeless shelter, and that’s exactly where Mike will land you.”

I hang up before I start crying, not giving her a chance to respond. Why did I buy his lies about looking for work for so long? He crushed me little by little, all the while pretending to be so nice, and I let it happen.

Never again. I decide. I won’t ever let myself be fooled that way again.

I still want to get my revenge on Mike, but first I’ve got to try and salvage what’s left of my life. I have to go to the police and see if I can resolve these financial issues... I can’t have a baby if I’m bankrupt, and I can only pray the police will help.

“I’m very sorry Miss. Reina, but if your ex-partner has left the area, there’s not much we can do about this.” The police officer breaks this news to me about as gently as he might smash an ant beneath his boot. “I’ll give you the police report to send to the credit card company, but that’s the most help you’re going to get from us.”

Anger fills me to the brim. I guarantee he’d never treat my case with so little consideration or respect if I wasn’t an impoverished nanny. If I was a wealthy man like Dominic Sinclair, he’d be fawning at my feet, offering to go to any lengths to solve my problems. I storm out of the station before I can lose my temper and verbally assault the man, immediately calling the credit card companies.

One by one they crush my hopes, telling me in no uncertain terms that unless a culprit is arrested in my case, I’ll be held responsible for the charges.

As I hang up on the final call, I can feel the earth crumbling beneath my feet. How did it come to this? I literally have nothing. No one will hire me without a recommendation from my previous employer, which means I won't be able to pay rent or keep food on the table. Normally I might turn to Cora in such a time, but I can't burden her with this when she's in the same boat.

Tomorrow I'll finally find out whether or not I'm pregnant, and up until now the strange sensation I've been experiencing the last few days has been a comfort and source of hope. I don't know how to explain it: it's as if I'm suddenly different somehow – even though I can't see any changes, I just have this intense knowing that I'm no longer the same woman I was a week ago.

I thought it was a sign the insemination worked, but now I'm praying that it's my imagination going overboard.

At first I try to distract myself, turning on the TV and freezing when I see Dominic Sinclair on the news talking about all his good will initiatives in the community. "When our work is finished, the Moon Valley children's home will be a place of love and community, motivated to find the best homes for every child in need. Our initiative not only ensures that the permanent residents in the home have the best possible conditions, but that there is continuous follow up with children placed with adoptive families to ensure they thrive in their new homes."

So much for the supposed philanthropist, I think bitterly. Turning a blind eye to the lives he's selfishly ruining all the while pretending to be a friend of the downtrodden. A week ago I might have been touched by such a broadcast. I grew up in an orphanage just like the one he's describing, and I know just how terrible the conditions can be. Now however, I see nothing but his hypocrisy. Cora was an orphan too, she didn't do anything wrong – where is his compassion for her? Clearly it's only for the TV cameras. It's a shame. He's very convincing... then again, so was Mike.

Of course Mike was never as handsome as Dominic Sinclair, nor did he ever have his charisma or imposing presence. I don't know if I've ever met anyone like him. Even while he was refusing to help me, scolding me and having me thrown out the door, part of me was still taken in by his handsome features and pure magnetism.

Shaking myself, I turn the TV off. What the hell is wrong with me? The man is a heartless billionaire and I'm still sitting here mooning over him like a silly schoolgirl.

I end up going to bed early, trying not to think about tomorrow. Of course, I still lie awake late into the night – I know what it means to grow up an orphan, and I can't countenance bringing a child into the world just to abandon it to that bleak existence. The more my life unravels, the more stark my options become.

If I am pregnant... Am I going to abort the child? Even though it's what I've wanted my entire life!

Chapter 5 – Pregnancy test

Ella

“No, I understand.” I murmur into the phone. “Thanks for listening at least.”

I wearily hang up the line, burying my head in my hands. I spent all morning calling in every favor and loan I possibly could, throwing my dignity right out the window to beg my friends and acquaintances in my time of need.

I've never thought of myself as a proud woman, but begging this way was more of a challenge than I could have imagined.

I only wish I could help Cora as well as myself. She's still waiting to hear if she'll be fired, and while she's not supposed to be handling any samples, she got permission to do my tests this afternoon. After all, I've already been inseminated, so her supervisor didn't see any risk of further negligence.

Still, I'm far from excited when I walk through the front doors of the sperm bank. Ten days ago I was heartsore but optimistic for the future, yearning for a baby more than anything else in the world. Now I'm dreading the exam.

However my trepidation soon gives way to surprise, because as soon as I enter the facility I have the strangest feeling that Dominic Sinclair is near. It takes me a while to actually find him, behind closed doors with Cora's bosses in a luxurious, glass-walled conference room, but I don't have the faintest idea how I knew he was present. I also don't understand why I feel drawn to him: after all, he's ruined both my sister's and my own life. I shouldn't be excited to see him.

It was dumb luck that I stumbled across his path, the conference room is on the way to Cora's office, but I find myself stopping to observe the meeting inside. I'm struck speechless when I lay eyes on him. Is it possible that he's gotten more attractive since the last time I saw him? It was already unfair that somebody that powerful and intelligent could be so handsome, but now it truly just feels like being kicked while I'm down. The bastard has a heart of stone, and still the universe has rained endless gifts upon him while people like Cora and I have nothing.

Shaking myself out of my trance, I continue down the hall, though I feel the weight of dark eyes on my back as I retreat. Cora has clearly been crying when I arrive. Her eyes are red and her cheeks splotchy, though she tries to hide it.

“Hey.” I greet her gently, wrapping her up in a hug. She leans into me, squeezing tight and lingering far longer than she usually would. “Is there any news?”

“Sinclair is in there finalizing it all now. I'm going to be given formal termination notice

this afternoon." She shares, sniffing slightly.

"I'm so sorry, honey." I croon, rubbing her back.

"It's okay." She lies, pulling away. "How are you hanging in there?"

"Not very well." I confess. "I'm sort of dreading this, to be honest."

"It's amazing how fast things can change, huh?" She asks, looking as though she might burst into tears. "I mean, what are we going to do, Elle?"

"Well figure it out." I promise. "We've been in tight spots before." I remind her, "remember the summer we slept in boxes on the street after we ran away from the orphanage?"

"Yeah," She nods with a sad smile. "But it's winter now, I don't think we'll last long in the elements. And you weren't pregnant then."

"Yeah well, if I'm pregnant now...." I can't look her in the eyes as I say this, "I don't think I'm going to stay that way."

"What?" Cora exclaims, looking horrified. "But this is your only chance! And we aren't completely hopeless, you've got time to try to figure out a plan B."

That phrase alone reminds me of Mike, and I realize I haven't shared my latest news with Cora. "I can't afford a baby even if I do find a job. I'm going to be paying off my debts for years to come." I share, filling her in on the details of Mike and Kate's latest betrayal.

"I can't believe this!" She bursts out when I'm finished. "It just isn't fair, Ella! I mean, I thought we paid our dues, I thought we were done with suffering. After everything we've been through, we deserve a better future than this! You deserve to be a mom – no one loves children more than you do."

"And you deserve to be a doctor." I reply. "You worked so hard."

"I still don't think you should give up yet." She frowns. "You can terminate the pregnancy up until the end of the first trimester. It would be a tragedy if you aborted it, then pulled off a miracle and it turned out you could have kept it. Don't take that risk. Keep the baby until the very last moment."

"I don't think miracles happen to people like me." I remark softly. "Besides that seems kind of like it's own form of torture – the longer I carry the baby the more attached I'm going to get. I don't want this to hurt any worse than it has to."

"It's going to hurt no matter what." Cora reasons, "You ought to give yourself a chance – keep the door open. Don't give up hope completely."

"Let's just find out if I have to make that decision in the first place." I state, changing the subject. "I may not even be pregnant." Yet even as I say it, I can feel in my heart that I am.

"Okay." Cora agrees, pulling a sterile cup wrapped in plastic from one of her cabinets. "You know what to do."

I take the cup and quickly duck into the bathroom to provide a urine sample, returning it to her almost immediately. I pace back and forth across the office as Cora runs the tests. "Well?" I press, seeing the results pop up on her computer screen.

She offers me a sad smile. "Congratulations little sister, you're going to have a baby."

I told myself that I wouldn't fall to pieces no matter the results, but as soon as the words are out of her mouth I'm crying. I've been waiting to hear those words for years and was beginning to think I never would. It's both unimaginable joy, and unimaginable pain. I never knew my heart could hold such conflicting emotions at the same time, let alone in such extremes. "Really?"

"Really." Cora confirms, hugging me. "Come on, let's do an ultrasound. You can hear the heartbeat."

"Isn't it too early?" I squeak.

"Just one of the benefits of being at the finest lab in the country." Cora quips, the words bittersweet on her tongue. "Our technology is years ahead of what's available in public hospitals."

Climbing onto the raised exam table, I lay back and lift my top, not bothering to change into a gown or cover my clothes with a sheet, I simply expose my flat belly as Cora wheels in an ultrasound on a cart. Within minutes the machine is emitting a strange whoosh woosh woosh, and Cora squirts a dollop of jelly on my tummy. She pressed the wand to my skin, and before long a tiny heartbeat sounds – making me cry all over again.

However Cora is frowning deeply. "This is so strange, the baby seems awfully large, but we tested you at your last visit to be sure you weren't already pregnant."

"What does that mean?" I ask anxiously. "Is the father just a big guy?"

“I don’t just mean size – I mean development.” Cora purses her lips and furrows her brows as she studies the images, suddenly looking very worried. She’s whispering now, speaking to herself more than to me. “It doesn’t look human... but that can’t be... it’s not possible.”

“What are you talking about?” I inquire, “How can you tell? Isn’t it just a tiny blob?”

“As I said, our tech is state of the art. It doesn’t just highlight shapes – it analyzes the molecular structure.” Before she can say another word, the door bursts open, startling us both. To my shock and horror, Dominic Sinclair is standing in the doorway, glaring at us as if we’ve done something terrible. “What’s the meaning of this?” He demands.

“What’s the meaning of this? I repeat in shock, “what’s the meaning of you barging into a private exam?!”

“Because,” He declares fiercely, and I swear his eyes are almost glowing with rage. “I can smell my pup.”

Chapter 6 – He's a werewolf

Ella

“Your pup?” I parrot, realizing I must sound like an idiot the way I keep repeating him – but it’s all too strange and surreal, I feel like ‘m having a dream — one that may or may not be a nightmare. “What are you talking about?”

I might have been admiring his physical prowess a little while ago, but now I’m back to thinking Dominic Sinclair is just plain terrifying. I’ve known my fair share of bad men, but none of them have ever intimidated me the way he does. It’s like he’s superhuman, giving off waves of energy that make me want to curl up into a little ball at his feet.

“You.” He narrows his eyes at Cora, then gestures to me. “Is this what you did with my sperm, you inseminated your friend?”

‘Of course not!’ She objects hotly, though there’s a noted shake in her voice. “Yes, I inseminated Ella last week, but not with your sperm. She chose a donor from our client dossier.

You’re lying.” He accuses, stating the accusation as if it’s fact. “Ella clearly knew about the samples – since she came to plead your case -“

“You did that?” Cora blinks at me

“Yes, but I was only trying to help. I thought he might show you mercy if he realized you would never do anything to risk your career” I apologize, “I’m so sorry, I just wanted to help.

“It’s okay.” She tells me gently, patting my hand and turning back to Sinclair. “That doesn’t mean anything... mean, yes I inseminated her on the same day your sample disappeared but... no – it’s not possible, your sample was in a separate fridge...” She trails off again, looking back at the ultrasound screen with wide eyes Oh my god...

What?” I inquire, beyond confused.

“It’s not human.” She murmurs again, so quietly I can barely hear her. Suddenly she whirls around, looking up at Dominic Sinclair with true fear. “I swear, I didn’t do it on purpose. I don’t know how it happened!”

“Why do you keep saying that it’s not human?” I question, beyond exasperated. “What else could it be – an alien?”

‘Don’t pretend like you don’t know.’ The infuriated man growls. “Don’t pretend like you two didn’t plan this precisely for this reason.”

Cora's hand is shaking on mine now. "Ella, when I told you about the samples, I only told you half the story. She explains. "I had to sign a thousand confidentiality documents, because certain secrets came along with

running tests on Mr. Sinclair's samples."

"What secrets?" I demand, feeling as if everyone around me is speaking in code.

"He's not..." She begins, glancing at the huge man nervously. "He's not human... he's a werewolf."

Before I can stop myself, I burst out into laughter. "No really, what is it?"

"Really." Cora whispers urgently. "He's a werewolf."

"Cora" I tell her, almost certain I'm dreaming now. "Werewolves aren't real.

I didn't believe they were either." She confesses, "until I started working here. This lab is as renowned as it is because there's two sides of the business. Half of our bank is dedicated to shifter samples, in fact very few humans work here because so few are trusted with the truth

I'm starting to truly worry for my sister, "Are you high?" ask under my breath

"He's not high" Sinclair rumbles drawing my attention back to his face. Now I'm sure his eyes are glowing with light, The evidence is right in front of me, but my brain can't figure out how to process it, Instead it shuts down. I feel a sudden wave of terror wash over me

When I wake, Cora is gone. I sit up on the exam table, trying to remember what happened. Of course it doesn't take long for me to recall the strange events that came to pass. because Dominic Sinclair is sitting in front of me. watching me closely, His eyes aren't glowing anymore. but I remember the way they'd lit up from within, I also remember the way he'd moved faster than should have been possible to rescue Jake. At the time I wrote it off as adrenaline but now I'm not so sure.

"How are you feeling, Ella?" He asks me, much calmer than he'd seemed earlier

"I think I'm losing my mind." I answer weakly. "This can't be real."

"It is real" He assures me. "Your friend should never have agreed to let you try to entrap me when she knew the truth."

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Please.” He scoffs, “I’ve had my men run your background, I know you’re bankrupt. Obviously you thoughtthat if you were pregnant with my child I would pay your debts for you. You simply miscalculated – you didn’t know what you were getting yourself into, or expect Cora to lose her job for the “mistake.” The horrible marhas the nerve to use air quotes around bis final word.

That’s insane!” I hiss. “I didn’t bankrupt myself- my identity was stolen and I didn’t even know about it untiafter the insemination. I’m not an irresponsible person, or the type of woman who expects a man to solve he

problems. I would never do what you’re suggesting.

I don’t want to hear your excuses.” He answers harshly. “The evidence is against you.”

“We don’t even know that it’s your child!” I remind him. “Maybe it isn’t…” I have to give myself a shake before can continue. “Maybe it isn’t human, but that doesn’t mean it’s yours.

“I know it’s mine.” Sinclair snarls, making me tremble with instinctive fear. “I can smell it, I can sense my

bloodline in your womb.

can only gape at him. He can smell it? Sense his bloodline? It’s like I’ve left reality and entered a differenuniverse. “This is crazy” I can feel myself sliding back into denial, “if werewolves were real. people wouldknow about it!”

Sinclair rolls his eyes and lifts a hand the size of a dinner plate. While I watch, five claws extend where hisfingernails were a moment ago. I stare at the odd and slightly sickening sight with abject disbelief. “How areyou doing that?”

“I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that’s your shock speaking, rather than youintelligence.” Sinclair draws.

I glower at him, temporarily forgetting that he’s not only a man twice my size, but apparently a lethalpredator. “You don’t get to talk to me like that just because you have money and howl at the moon.

He arches one dark brow, challenging my defiance. “Is that so?”

Yes,” I snap, crossing my arms overchest and tiltincg my chin up stubbornly. “t is.If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he wanted to smile. I swear the corners of his mouth

twitched. "You're agutsy little thing, I'll give you that."

I don't want you to give me anything." I growl, " want you to leave me alone.

His eyes flash dangerously, "That's not going to happen. You're carrying my pup.

Pup." I say, feeling my stomach churn uncomfortably, "like., four leas and a tail?

"No." He answers. not unkindly, "t doesn't work that way.

Well how does it work?" i question, more subdued now. "How does any of this work?

Well in a lot of ways werewolves are iust like hbumans " " cinclair eynlains leanina back in his chair hut nevetaking his eyes off me. In fact, his gaze is so intense I'm finding it increasingly difficult not to squirm. "Wecome into the world in human form and we live most of our lives the same way. Most shifters don't maketheir first transformationuntil thew're a few wears oldthere – heightened instincts, sights as adults maketeRtinAlgn ae aautAraAit look. It's like learnina to speake doing in theearly years."

"But how can I be pregna

For the first time Sinclair looks less sure of himself. "m actually not sure. I've never heard of such a thinghappening, Our society exists parallel to your own, A few people – like your friend – are occasionally let in orthe secret, but it's only in very special cases and they never truly integrate. It's only when someone hascertain knowledge or expertise that's very valuable to us.

So there's iust like... a shadow world full of werewolves that exists right under human's noses?" i summarize.

"That's a nice way of putting it, yes." He confirms.

And packs and alphas... all the things we read in paranormal novels -is that all real?"

"Well our transformations have nothing to do with the full moon, but other than that many things are correct. We're much faster and stronger than humans, and our society is divided into packs but they're very large. You can think of them like provinces or states in a larger kingdom." Sinclair shares.

"Kingdom?"I ask,"Like with a king and queen and everything?"

"Yes" His answer seems strangely loaded, as if he's omitting something very important – but I don't know what it might be.

“Now, if you’re done asking questions, can we finally talk seriously?”

“Talk seriously?”What could be more serious than turning my entire world upside down?

He stares pointedly at my“About this baby.”

Chapter 7 – Agreement

Ella

“This baby is mine.” I tell him possessively. “You can’t just tell me you’re magic and expect me to take that as proof you’re the father.”

“My senses don’t lie, little human.” Sinclair declares, leaving no room for argument. “Nor do my investigators. You’re not in any position to care for this child. Your income is too low to pay off your debts in time, and no woman who claims to be responsible would ever get pregnant in such a situation.”

“My income?” I force the words out through clenched teeth, “what income? You got me fired!”

The big man... or wolf, I suppose, blinks in surprise. “You were fired?”

“Now who’s playing dumb?” I demand wryly. “You called the Graves after I asked you to help Cora, you got me fired and ruined my reputation.”

“I did no such thing.” He insists. “I didn’t even know you were no longer employed.”

“I thought your investigators were the best?” I taunt, and I can feel myself toeing the line of his temper.

“Clearly this was very recent.” He bites back. “And I don’t blame you for becoming desperate, but you have to admit the only explanation for this,” He gestures to my tummy, “is that you needed money and hoped to extort it from me in exchange for the child.”

“I wanted this child more than anything in the world!” I exclaim, surging to my feet. “I’ve been trying to get pregnant for years and when I came to Cora I didn’t know about the identity theft or that I was going to lose my job. This was my last chance and you have no idea how hard it’s been... how painful it is to think I might have to abort it because of everything that’s happened since.” I didn’t mean to tell him so much, but the words poured out of me before I could stop them. I’ve been so preoccupied with these thoughts the last few days I clearly couldn’t keep them contained.

“Abort it!?” Sinclair rises to his feet in a blur, suddenly towering over me despite the fact that I’m still standing on the exam table’s step. “So now you’re threatening me?”

“What?!” I cry, “no! It doesn’t have anything to do with you, as you said I can’t afford to have a baby so I was trying to do the right thing!”

“Werewolves don’t abort their pups.” He growls. “Our children are too precious and Cora

knows that. I'm sure that's what she was thinking when she suggested using my sperm."

"Argh!" I explode, clenching my hands into fists. "You're impossible! How many times do I have to tell you that if this child is yours, it was an accident! Cora didn't switch the samples on purpose and I didn't get pregnant because I wanted you to pay off my debts!"

He narrows his eyes at me. "You're a very good actress, you know that?"

"And you're a snake." I snap. "I wouldn't be surprised if you have scales when you shift instead of fur!"

A true growl sounds in his chest, so full of raw power that my knees go weak. "Be careful Ella, I'm showing you a lot of lenience right now because you don't know our ways, but keep speaking to me like that and I'll –"

"You'll what?" I hiss, "you just told me how precious your pups are so I know you're not going to hurt me." To my horror, I feel my eyes burning with tears. Swiping at them angrily, I continue, "and I've already lost everything else I care about, so it's not like you can punish me some other way."

I spin away so that he can't see me cry. I don't know what to do – I know how suspicious our situation looks. If I didn't know better, I would think the same thing he did. It was all too suspicious, especially now that I know the truth about Cora's lab. It couldn't be easy to mix up samples of different species... wait a minute. The little voice in the back of my head whispers, and I turn back to Sinclair.

"If you didn't know it was possible for a human to be impregnated by a werewolf, why would Cora have ever attempted to use your sperm?" I interrogate. "She couldn't have known it was the wrong sample. She wouldn't have believed it would work even if we were as calculating as you seem to think. And if all I wanted was to extort your money, why haven't I asked for it? Why haven't I admitted it?"

The huge werewolf blinks, processing this information with a grimace. Silence stretches between us and eventually he sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I'm not saying I believe you, but however it happened, we need to come to an agreement."

I eye him warily, "what sort of agreement?"

"Just name your price, Ella." He mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. "How much do you want?"

"For what? The baby?" I sputter, "You want me to sell you my child?"

"It's my child, and it will be raised by me." He insists. "You don't belong in my world. So how much is it going to take for you to give it up?"

"I'm not going to negotiate a price for my baby, like it's a bag of rice or a car! Nor do I want it raised by someone who thinks of it as nothing more than a commodity!" I'm raising my voice now, feeling beyond offended for the tiny being in my womb.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Sinclair grumbles, "do you have any idea how long I've been waiting for an heir?"

"An heir, not a child – not a son or daughter, but an heir – is that all it is to you? Some hypothetical legacy? I might not be able to prevent myself from losing this child now, but I'm not going to hand it over to someone who doesn't give a damn about it beyond what it can offer them." I state ferociously, my maternal instincts kicking into high gear.

"As I said, you don't know what you're talking about." He repeats gutturally. "I will give this baby a life you never could, it will want for absolutely nothing! With you its best chance is to scrounge and scrape in poverty, assuming you have the decency to let it live. With me it will be treated like a prince or princess."

"Money can't buy everything." I remind him coolly. "I notice you said nothing about love."

"Because I already love it!" He snarls, "I have a connection to my pup you will never understand. How dare you speak to me about love when you contemplated killing it!"

"That was also out of love!" I exclaim, "I didn't want it to suffer, I didn't want it to grow up like..." I almost said, 'like I did', but I stop myself just in time. "I love it more than myself, and I was willing to sacrifice my own happiness for its sake."

"Then do as much now." Sinclair commands, "Give it a life you can't, by signing over custody to me. Carry the baby and deliver it, then leave it with me where it belongs."

"You don't understand, if I do that I'll never be able to walk away from it." I beseech him. "I'm not that strong. If I carry it to term, I'll never be able to give it up – I need to be there to care for and protect it."

"That's simply not possible." Sinclair proclaims. "You aren't fit to be a mother to any child and especially not mine. You can't even care for yourself, that much is obvious by your debts—"

"I already told you—" I try to object, however he keeps talking over me.

"And your excuse about Cora assumes she understands enough about werewolf society to know we don't cross breed. All she knows is that we exist, and how to inseminate our

women. She probably assumed we occasionally mate with humans and just lucked out!" He accuses.

"She's a doctor who works with your samples all the time, she probably knows a lot more about your organic chemistry than you do yourselves." I defend, realizing too late that this could also incriminate her.

He arches his brow, clearly thinking along the same lines. "Either way, she proved she wasn't to be trusted as soon as she betrayed her confidentiality agreement about my sperm to you, and you've proved you can't be trusted by changing your story every ten seconds. You can't love the baby enough to abort it but not love it enough to give it up to a better life. I clearly just haven't offered you a high enough price yet."

"That isn't fair," I object, shaking my head. I've just learned everything I believe to be true was actually false, at the height of an extremely emotional moment. I wasn't even conscious the whole time. How can he expect me to think or communicate clearly?

He doesn't budge. "It's alright, Ella. You don't need to make excuses. I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse."

Chapter 8 – Compromise

Ella

Up until this point of my life, I've hated a handful of people. At the moment Mike and Kate are at the top of my list, but they aren't alone. However Dominic Sinclair is very quickly rising through the ranks and making a play for the top spot. Mike and Kate's betrayal hurt so much because I cared for them both, but Sinclair might be the first person I've encountered who I dislike this strongly after so short a time.

He's looking me up and down with the bearing of a wolf deciding how to devour the rabbit in its claws, and I realize that's all I am to him. All those intense looks over the last couple of years, every encounter, every smile – the entire time he's been thinking I'm some lesser being, the prey to his predator. Maybe he's like Mike and thought I was a particularly attractive specimen, but in the end they're the same sort of monster.

"There is no offer you could ever make me that would convince me to give you my child." I tell him sharply. "I am not for sale, and neither is my baby."

"Now you're just being stubborn." Sinclair sighs, "digging in your heels because you don't like me."

"What gave it away?" I deride. For the second time, it seems like he wants to smile despite his better judgment, but again he holds back.

"Use your head, Ella." He instructs patronizingly. "Let's say I believe you didn't do this just to cash in on a big pay day."

"You obviously don't!" I interrupt, earning myself a look so stern a shiver runs down my spine.

"Let's say I do. What are your options? How are you going to raise this child? If you try to abort it I will take you to court and I guarantee the judge will prevent you from going through with it – which means you can either keep the baby and try to get by on your own, or let me have it."

"Take me to court if you like." I challenge, even though my will to go through with terminating the pregnancy has gotten weaker and weaker from the moment I learned it was real. "You forget it's my body."

"Which you intentionally inseminated. It's not like you got knocked up after a one night stand or were assaulted. I'm offering a child a good life and I have more political sway than you can imagine." He flashes his teeth at me, teeth that look alarmingly like fangs. "Not to mention I'm a donor at every hospital in the city, no physician will perform the procedure and risk me defunding their entire facility."

Suddenly I can see how this man acquired so much money and power, he has more cunning than I know how to contemplate, with a clear killer instinct. All at once I realize he's right, the judges and doctors will side with him, whether he convinces them or bribes them – he'll win.

He's trapped me and I didn't even realize it was happening. I have no doubt he's every bit as ruthless as he seems, which means I'm going to have to carry this baby to term whether I can afford it or not. My best hope is to find some other job in that time, but even then the best life I'd be able to offer my baby is an impoverished one. It's not like disgraced nannies get hired as CEOs.

Sinclair can clearly read my dismay, because he strikes again. "If you cooperate, I'll pay off your debts. I'll help you find a job and cover every last one of your medical and living expenses. If you deliver me an heir, I will also pay you a handsome bonus, and give you anything else you like – a house? A car? A business investment? Be my surrogate and you can have anything your little heart desires."

"But I'm not just a surrogate." I remind him, feeling as though my heart was crumbling to pieces in my chest. "I'm this child's mother. It has my DNA and it will be half human. It has a right to that heritage as well as yours."

He shakes his head. "This child will be a werewolf, and a powerful one at that – my genes guarantee it. It will be raised with its own kind. And it will have a wonderful life, Ella – I promise."

"Why should I trust you?" I wonder aloud, "you clearly don't trust me, why do you expect me to give you something you refuse to offer in return."

"I have good reason not to trust you, but you have no reason not to trust me. I've never wronged you." He says, as if this justifies everything.

"Bull," I combat, "you cost Cora her job, you cost me mine – even if you didn't make the call, whoever did reported that I was begging at your gates."

"Cora cost herself her job." He claims firmly. "Mistake or malice, my sperm ended up in your womb – a place it never should have been." His foreboding expression softens for a moment. "And I truly am sorry about your job – I know how much Jake and Millie loved you. If you want your job back, I can make it happen."

I don't know what I think of that possibility. I'd love to see my precious charges again, but I don't know if I can get past their mother's cruelty. "Money can't fix everything." I reply, "and all your promises – what good is having everything I need if I'll never have the thing I want most?"

"If it's a child you want, I can help you adopt a human baby." He offers, circling me as if he's some sort of wolfish vulture. He clearly senses he's closing in on the kill, and he's not wrong.

I can feel my lip begin to tremble as fresh tears threaten. It feels selfish to say 'but I want this baby', especially when I grew up an orphan and know how many children need good homes. In truth Sinclair is offering me the world on a platter – my baby gets to live and have a good life, all my problems will be solved, and I can adopt a child that needs a mother as badly as I need to be one. Am I being silly, holding onto my childhood baggage about wanting to be part of a family bonded through more than just affection, a family bonded by blood? After all, blood is no guarantee of love – how many kids did I grow up with whose natural parents abandoned or abused them?

In the end, I don't think I have a choice. I have to do this. Knowing my baby will be loved and cared for, will have to be enough. It's the best solution for us both, and the fact that it hurts so badly doesn't mean it's wrong.

"Draft a contract before I change my mind." I grind out, hating this man more than I can express.

Sinclair nods, and strides to the door. A little while later one of his men comes in with a heavy stack of documents, which takes me almost a full hour to read through. When I finally close the last page and nod in approval, the lawyer places the contract in front of Sinclair, who promptly turns to add his signatures to all the appropriate pages.

"You're doing the right thing, Ella." He tosses over his shoulder, triumph clear in his voice.

"That's easy for you to say." I gripe, watching him lean over the document brandishing a fountain pen. "Are you proud of yourself? Bullying a weak little human into giving you the only child she'll ever have?" I inquire to his back. "You sent your sperm here because you struggled with infertility too, didn't you? How would you feel if you and your wife finally conceived and someone took the baby from you?"

Sinclair straightens up, going very still but not acknowledging my words. When he turns around his expression is completely closed off. "Actually I'm not married." He tells me. "Not anymore."

"Way to miss the point." I mutter under my breath, snatching the pen from his hand and moving in front of the contract. Before I can add my signature to the pages, I feel the room begin to spin. I brace my hands against the low table, clamping my eyes shut then blinking them open and trying to clear my vision, which is suddenly very blurry. The blood is rushing in my ears.

“How long have we been in this room?” I ask, feeling as if my body is being slowly doused in warm water. All my senses are fuzzy, and it’s not until Sinclair appears at my side that I realize I slurred my words. “Are you alright, Ella?”

My legs give out, and I suddenly find myself slumping into a very large, very hard wall of concerned werewolf. Powerful arms come around me, and Sinclair’s scent fills my nose. It’s deep and rich, like being deep in the forest on a moonlit night. “You smell nice.” I murmur, sounding completely drunk, before the world goes black for the second time in as many hours.

However this time, I hear an odd grumbling noise as I sink into the darkness. At first I think it’s Sinclair, but the sound isn’t coming from his chest, it almost sounds like it’s coming from... inside me?

Chapter 9 – Counterattack

Ella

I blink my eyes open warily, knowing I'm not at home in my own bed solely by the luxurious mattress and beddings surrounding me. The last thing I remember, I was in Cora's office with none other than Dominic Sinclair, who was single-handedly offering to save my future and break my heart in one fell swoop.

I was about to sign away my rights to my baby... my baby, I think dazedly, pressing one hand to my belly. Am I really pregnant? After all this time?

The idea that I have to give up my child because life dealt me yet another ruthless blow makes me feel sick to my stomach... in fact, I lurch from the bed and race for the bathroom, feeling my insides roil and clench. I make it to the toilet just in time, emptying my stomach into the porcelain bowl and dropping to my knees with a groan of misery.

I suppose that's all the proof I need. I really am going to be a mother... but for how long? 30 seconds? Five minutes? Will Dominic Sinclair give me the opportunity to even hold my baby before ripping it from my arms? Do I want that torture? Yes, I decide instantly. I have to hold my baby in my arms, even if it's only for a fraction of a second.... Even if we aren't technically the same species.

That particular thought sends my head spinning so quickly I have to clench my eyes shut. Werewolves are real. Not only are they real, but I'm pregnant with one... Dominic Sinclair, who I've mooned over a thousand times, is a creature I believed only existed in novels and films. And what was that grumbling noise when I passed out, why did it feel like I could hear his voice in my head?

All of a sudden it's just too much to handle. I slip back into the bedroom and climb back into the opulent bed, for the first time realizing I must be in the Sinclair mansion. There's no other explanation. I've never been in a room this beautiful, or with such expensive furnishings. It must all belong to him.

But why would he bring me home with him? I have a home of my own. Peeking out of the plush covers, I scan the room, my eyes landing on a table by the door. There's a vase of flowers and a folded note, which appears to have my name scrawled across the front. Gingerly regaining my feet, I collect the parchment and open it, my heart beating a mile a minute.

Ella,

Please make yourself at home. I'll be at the office until this evening, but as soon as I return we can finish our talk. Ask the servants for anything you require.

Yours,

Dominic

And if I want to go home? I think defiantly, What then Mr. Bossy?

The suggestion that there's a discussion to conclude between us grates on my nerves. He basically left me with no choice, leveraging safety, stability and my child's wellbeing over my head so that I'd be forced to agree to his terms. It's not as if I really stood a chance against him. He has all the power in the world while I have nothing, and he made it very clear that there was no wiggle room in our agreement.

Maybe passing out was my brain's subconscious way of protecting me, giving me more time to process and think before signing away my baby. Or if not my brain, whatever higher power created shifters and humans – this entire crazy planet. I never considered myself religious before, but if magic is real, who's to say what else is possible?

Tears well in my eyes, and unlike earlier, they have nothing to do with my joy over being pregnant, or my grief about everything I'm losing. These tears are nothing but pure, righteous anger over everything that's happened to me over the last few days. Cora's words ring in my head, "It isn't fair." It isn't fair that I have to lose everything because of the actions and cruelty of other people. It isn't fair that Dominic Sinclair should hold my future ransom when he could fix it with the snap of his fingers. The amount of money it will take to repay my debts isn't even a drop in the bucket to him, and I'm pregnant with his child. He could easily help me without also robbing me of my baby – as if he has no concept of the value of a mother's love.

Before I can change my mind, I gather myself and slip out the bedroom door, sneaking through the hallways until I finally find my way out of the maze of a house. Only once does a servant try to stop me. I'm almost to the front door when a guard steps in front of me, "Miss, you don't have permission to leave."

I notch my chin up and glare at the man. "Are you going to stop me?"

He looks as though he wants to do just that. He frowns deeply, eyeing me closely. I can almost see the thoughts scrolling through his head. Yes he has orders not to let me leave, but he also knows I'm pregnant with his boss's precious heir. He can't risk roughing me up if I fight back.

After a moment I decide to test the strength of his resolve, storming past him without another word. When I arrive home a little while later, I head straight for my computer, pulling up the internet browser and typing in Dominic Sinclair's name. He might have fancy investigators to look into my past, but I'm no simpleton, I can do research as well as anyone.

At first I find only fawning business articles about his genius intellect and cunning as a negotiator and investor. It seems like everyone who's ever decided to look into the man has fallen in love with him. Nevermind the fact that he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, they make it sound as though he's a completely self made man. The articles lament his difficult childhood growing up without a mother, and a number of interviews actually detail how deeply this affected him. The way they tell it, being raised by a single parent is the worst upbringing a child could have.

After I've read through all the financial analyses and rave reviews, I dig deeper, looking into his philanthropic record and secret identity. I'm mildly dismayed to find all his charitable efforts are completely legitimate and he actually does donate half his revenues to those in need (of course, half a colossal fortune still leaves a fortune behind). The internet is chock-full of reports and speeches he's made, good will efforts to better mankind.

Things are less clear when I try digging into his true status as a werewolf. At first my searches result in little more than illuminati conspiracy theories and nonsense, and I realize keeping an entire species secret must require more discretion. It occurs to me that there might be a dark or parallel web for werewolves, just like there are for illicit activities.

It takes most of the afternoon, but eventually I figure out that I can download a special browser to access the dark web, and before long I've dived deep into the annals of werewolf society. Here I find a very different image of the perfect businessman touted in the human media (Don't even get me started on how bizarre it is to discover that there really is a sprawling werewolf society thriving in the shadows of my own).

Apparently Dominic Sinclair isn't just any werewolf, but the Alpha of the Moon Valley pack and prospective King of the entire bloody continent. No wonder he'd been so vague and guarded when I asked about ruling monarchs! He's poised to become the next King himself, if he can pull off his upcoming campaign.

There aren't many contenders in the race, but Sinclair's been undermined by his family situation. The last king died without an heir and left werewolf society with a dangerous power vacuum – it's the reason they have to select a new king in the first place. No one wants to repeat this cycle with another childless King, and the fact that Sinclair has been unable to produce an heir is only half the problem. He also doesn't have a mate, or Luna – not anymore at least.

I read until my eyes grow sore, learning that Sinclair was once married to a she-wolf who left him when he couldn't give her a child – despite the fact that they were fated mates (another concept I can't wrap my mind around). It's no wonder he was so intense about finally having an heir – I thought he was just a domineering jerk who believed he needed

to pass down his business legacy or something, not that the entire future of his society might depend on it. The articles made it very clear that werewolves would be in serious trouble if he doesn't take the throne. A few of his competitors can only be described as power mad and unhinged, and they're doing their best to discredit Sinclair.

When I finally finish, sitting back in my chair and dragging my hand over my face, I try to wrap my brain around all this. Sinclair needs an heir, he needs a Luna, and he knows how difficult it can be for a child to grow up without a mother. For all his cunning, I now know all his weak spots. If I play my cards right, I just might be able to talk the terrifying Alpha into letting me stick around after the baby is born. Then I can prove how critical it is for a child to be with its mother – I can give us all a chance.

Even as I think these optimistic words, a knock sounds on the door, and somehow I know it's Dominic Sinclair before I can even get up off the couch. Taking a deep breath I stride across the room and pull the heavy door open, revealing one very large, very angry werewolf bearing down on me.

Chapter 10 – Move

3rd Person

Sinclair glared down at the tiny human in front of him. It seemed every time he saw Ella she grew more beautiful, especially since he learned she was carrying his pup. She'd been an enchanting distraction before, now she was almost irresistible. With fair skin, rose gold hair and eyes so amber they almost seemed metallic, he found it hard to believe she was not a wolf herself. However, as delectable as her scent was, she was clearly nothing extraordinary.

"Why did you leave?" Sinclair demanded, scanning his sharp eyes over her body to make sure she was unharmed. His attention lingered on her flat tummy, where his pup safely rested. He could still smell it, hear its tiny heartbeat and feel an inexplicable connection to the miniscule bundle of cells.

"Because I'm not a dog. I don't sit and stay just because you tell me to." Ella announced, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I didn't order you to do anything." Sinclair argued, baffled by the way his wolf purred in response to her sass.

"And yet you seem displeased that I didn't sit by and obediently wait for you to come home and dictate more decisions about my future." Ella quipped, leaning against the doorframe.

"I didn't dictate anything." Sinclair argued. "We negotiated fair and square."

"If that's what you call fair it's no wonder you earned your ruthless reputation." Ella remarked slyly, "I wasn't in any state to have such an important conversation, let alone make such a momentous decision."

Sinclair didn't seem to hear her, instead he'd slipped past her into the apartment. "Is this where you live?"

"Obviously." Ella rolled her eyes.

He shook his head, "This won't due."

"Excuse me?" Ella gaped, "you've got some nerve you know –"

"I won't have the mother of my pup staying in such poor conditions." Sinclair decided, "You'll move into my estate as soon as possible."

Ella clenched her fists at her sides and took a deep breath. "I make my own decisions."

“Not since you agreed to our deal.” Sinclair countered. “The moment you said yes, you handed over authority to me.”

“I didn’t sign anything!” Ella reminded him.

A verbal agreement is enough in werewolf law – the contract was really for you.” Sinclair announced, smirking like the cat who ate the canary.

“Then why did your note say we needed to finish our conversation, what was there to finish if not signing the deal?” Ella demanded hotly.

“Everything, including you moving in with me, your prenatal regimen, birth plan, financial arrangements.” Sinclair explained, striding into Ella’s bedroom and pulling open the closet doors. By the time Ella reached him, he was already pulling a suitcase from the top shelf.

“Stop that!” Ella insisted, vigorously attempting to wrest the suitcase from his hand. She tugged the large bag so forcefully she almost lost her balance. In fact she was pulling with all her strength and weight, if Sinclair had chosen to release his end of the bag she would certainly topple to the ground. “I never agreed to move in with you!”

The next thing Ella knew, the huge shifter’s hand was circling her nape, applying just enough pressure to freeze her in her tracks but not enough to hurt. “Listen closely, itle human” He rumbled authoritatively, radiating power. ” appreciate your spirit, but as long as you’re carrying my pup, you will be careful, and wrestling with wolves twice your size over heavy luggage is not allowed.”

Ella narrowed her eyes at the attractive Alpha. Her instincts were going a bit haywire at the moment. Her insides were in puddles over being so near him, her knees were weak in the face of his stern scolding, and her heart was in full revolt. No one had ever cared about her enough when she was young to set rules and discipline, so she’d been running wild for as long as she could remember. And she did not take kindly to being told what to do now. With a fiery flash in her amber eyes, she stomped her smalfoot right onto his, sending pain vibrating up through her own bones, and not even phasing him.

Ella couldn’t smother her whimper, “What are you made of, steel?”

“That’s what tussling with a wolf will get you” He responded unsympathetically, releasing her and stalking to the bed, where he neatly unfolded the suitcase. “Now be a good girl, and pack your bags.

“I would sooner set everything I own on fire.” Ella replied coolly, resisting the urge to rub her aching foot.

That might not be the worst idea.” Sinclair muttered, glancing at her wardrobe. “If you’re going to live with me, you might as well look the part too. Should I fetch a lighter?”

“No!” Ella yelled, moving to protect her things. “They might not be up to your standards but I like my things, and I like my apartment” In truth, this apartment reminded Ella too much of Mike, and she hadn’t picked out any of her furniture or appliances they were all hand-me downs. Still, she didn’t appreciate the way Sinclair was trying to order her around. There might be an exchange of money or services in their arrangement, but she wasn’t one of his servants, and it was important they establish that if her plan was going to work.

Sinclair cocked his head to the side, eyeing her as if she were a profound curiosity. “And how are you going to pay your rent on this place?”

Ella’s mouth opened and closed helplessly. “That’s not the point.”

Sinclair wasn’t sure what to make of the beautiful human. The more time he spent around her, the more his wolf began to sit up and pay attention. His wolf had always perked up with interest when he saw Ella around the neighborhood, but he’d never allowed himself to explore those feelings because she was a human. Now however.. now he had every excuse to figure out the puzzle that was Ella. “It’s part of the arrangement.” He dictated firmly, “you’ll be back on your feet faster if you don’t have to worry about living expenses, and I want you close – this baby is too important to me.”

It was true Sinclair didn’t want to let her out of his sight, but that was also because he’d been dreaming of becoming a father for years. He didn’t want to miss a moment of Ella’s pregnancy. The little human was beginning to squirm beneath the weight of his gaze, and he could see her working through the problem in her mind. She had to realize it made more sense for her to stay with him, she might be feisty, but she was far from stupid.

“Fine,” Ella finally conceded, shooting Sinclair a sulky pout. “But I want to talk to you about a few things first.”

“Are you going to keep glaring at me that way while you do?” Sinclair asked, his mischievous wolf egging him on. He wasn’t sure what it was about seeing Ella all riled up, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself from pushing her buttons.

“Ye—” Ella bit back her response, seeming to think better of losing her temper with him. She needed to convince him, to persuade him – not alienate him. “No.” She amended, taking a deep breath. “I want to talk to you about our arrangement. What’s going to happen to the baby in the early years? Who’s going to care for it?”

“I’ll pay someone.” Sinclair responded simply, “A nursemaid.”

“Why would you ever pay someone when the baby’s mother is there and dying to do all the things a servant would? It will need milk and lullabies and love, I can provide that better than anyone. Forgive me, but I know you aren’t married, and a child needs a mother.” Ella was hoping this would be an emotional subject for the man – it can’t have been easy to grow up without a mother. “It’s healthier for the baby to have me around, especially given how busy you are. You can’t exactly take a newborn to the office with you every day.”

Sinclair hesitated. He knew she was right, it was better for the pup to have Ella near, and he didn’t want his heir to grow up the way he did. Still, Ella didn’t belong in his world. She was human and she couldn’t be trusted – this was probably another scheme to swindle him somehow. She’d already proven what a good actress she was back at the sperm bank. It was a clever ploy, but he wasn’t going to let another conniving woman ruin his life. He’d learned his lesson with his ex-wife, Lydia.

Ella was watching him closely, reading his expression and scrambling for another argument. Her eyes lit up after a moment’s thought, and her pink lips parted for the battle. “It would help you politically as well. I’ve been doing some research, I know you’re campaigning to become Alpha King and you’ll appear stronger with a family by your side. How would it look, if you have to hire a human to carry your child? Wouldn’t you prefer to simply tell everyone I’m your girlfriend?”

So much cunning in such a small package – it was honestly impressive. “So you want to be a queen, is that it?” Sinclair growled suspiciously.

“No!” Ella exclaimed, “I’m not suggesting we actually become a couple, I can pretend to be a... a werewolf...” She couldn’t believe she was saying those words. “And we can put on a show in public so that you can say we’re in a relationship and you’re finally having a baby.” Ella shrugged, the idea still forming as she spoke. “It could be an extension in our contract – you get a family in public and the baby gets two parents.”

Sinclair considered her words carefully. “You’re serious?”

“Yes.” Ella insisted. “What do you think?”

Chapter 11 – Call me Dominic

Sinclair shook his head almost as soon as the words were out of Ella's mouth. The idea was intriguing, but it would never succeed. "That's not how it works – we aren't mates. My kind only gets one, and everyone already knows I found mine many years ago." Sinclair informed her coolly.

"But... you got divorced." Ella's words were tremulous and hesitant, as if she was afraid to bring up the subject. She'd clearly been very busy with her research. He was about to tell her off, when his wolf roared in his head. Enough! Stop this, you know she's right – it's better for everyone this way.

Sinclair was taken aback, his wolf never disagreed with him – they'd always been on the same page about everything. The pup is most important, it needs its mother. His wolf continued, besides, she's not asking you for anything – if she was just a gold-digger like Lydia, she'd be eager to move in with you.

I don't know. Sinclair thought. It's worth taking a second look at Ella's background but –

No buts! His wolf interrupted. Give her what she wants.

Why are you so determined about this? Sinclair demanded, surprised by his inner canine's insistence.

We can't hurt Ella. His wolf proclaimed fiercely. She'll suffer if we take the pup away.

Sinclair had to admit he didn't want the lovely human to be in pain, but he still didn't trust her. His wolf on the other hand was absolutely adamant, and all shifters knew better than to question their animal instincts. Intuition didn't lie – not when it came to the supernatural.

"Fine." He grumbled. "But only if you help with my campaign. It won't be easy, there's more to being a Luna than standing on my arm and looking pretty."

Ella's face lit up so brightly Sinclair had to fight his smile. His wolf on the other hand, actually wagged his tail like an excited puppy. What the hell is going on with me? He thought, speaking more to himself than his wolf – who was clearly losing his mind.

"What's a Luna?" Ella asked curiously, barely able to contain her joy but trying to remain engaged in the conversation.

"It's an Alpha's mate." Sinclair explained, realizing just how much he was going to have to teach her. "And for the record, this little arrangement will only last until I meet a she-wolf who might fill the role for real."

“But you just told me werewolves only get one mate.” Ella questioned, not understanding.

“We only get one fated mate. Chosen mates are completely different. We can choose as many as we like, but the Goddess only grants us one fated love.” Sinclair informed her. “The bond is different” “Different, as in weaker?” Ella clarified. “No —just different” Sinclair corrected. “Not all fated mates are a good fit, and some chosen couples are much happier together.” “So if you find another mate, I won’t be allowed to see the baby anymore?” Ella asked, gnawing on her lower lip.

“We can talk about it if and when it happens.” Sinclair stated after a moment “But I want to be very clear that this agreement only lasts as long as it works. If we can’t find a way to get along well enough to convince people or if I learn that this is all another one of your tricks—” Ella’s eyes flared with anger, but Sinclair forged on ahead. “The deal is off.”

Though Ella’s cheeks were flushed bright pink, she set her shoulders as if preparing herself to take on a great challenge. “Fine. Have your people draw up the contracts.”

“I will.” Sinclair agreed, “As soon as you pack your bags.”

Ella sent another glower his way, and though his wolf was preoccupied thinking how adorable she was when she was grumpy, Sinclair couldn’t help but take her in hand. He Reached out and caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting her pretty face up to his. “And Ella — the first rule of being a shifter? The Alpha makes the rules.”

Sinclair watched as his words sunk in. Ella’s eyes narrowed, and she was squirming again, positively overflowing with defiance. He had to give her credit, for someone who’d only just learned about the existence of werewolves, she certainly wasn’t afraid of him. In fact, she was showing much more bravery than many fully grown wolves did facing down an Alpha.

Of course, there were Alphas, and then there was Sinclair- who was strong enough to bring even the most dominant pack leaders in line. Though perhaps it was simply that Ella didn’t realize just how dangerous he was.

After a moment Ella settled, looking up at Sinclair from beneath her lashes. “Yes, sir.” She ground out, clearly hating being forced to submit.

“I like the sound of that.” He praised, dragging his thumb over her full bottom lip. “But if we’re going to pull this off, you should call me Dominic.”

A visible shiver ran down Ella’s spine, and Sinclair’s wolf purred with pleasure. Her amber eyes were so wide he could see every glimmering shade of gold in her irises. Her

dark lashes fluttered as he stared her down, and eventually she lowered her eyes and murmured, “Yes, Dominic.”

When Ella arrived back at Dominic Sinclair’s mansion, she was beside herself with confusion. She’d started her negotiation with him feeling completely in control, but now it seemed like he’d completely turned the tables on her. She wasn’t sure when or how it had happened, but the bossy werewolf had somehow managed to get the better of her. In the moment it had seemed like he had some strange power over her, like she’d been hypnotized by his dark gaze.

Her mind was absolutely overflowing with thoughts, but the moment she stepped into the bedroom Sinclair had prepared for her, her mind went entirely blank. It was the same room she’d woken up in that afternoon, but everything was different now.

The beautiful space was full of candles and music, the air scented with essential oils. Ella felt as if she was walking into a spa, in fact there were even servants running a hot bath in the massive whirlpool tub in the bathroom, just waiting for her to arrive. Ella could barely take in all the finery and amenities Sinclair had brought in, including a craft table and miniature fridge full of drinks and snacks. There was even a massage table set up along the far wall. “You did all this for me?” Ella gaped, staring up at Sinclair’s handsome face in abject disbelief.

He blinked down at her, not seeming to understand why she was so surprised. “Pups are more important than anything.”

Of course. Ella thought, somewhat bitterly. It’s not for me, it’s for the pup.

“Here.” Sinclair offered Ella a small golden bell. “Ring this whenever you need anything.”

Ella shook her head, trying to push the bell away. “I don’t feel comfortable being waited on by servants.”

“It’s not for the servants.” Sinclair informed her, guiding her to wrap her fingers around the bell, “it’s for me. If you need me for anything, ring that and I’ll come.”

Ella reeled, “But... couldn’t I just come find you, am I not allowed to leave this room?”

Sinclair rolled his eyes. “Of course you can. I’m just trying to make things easy on you – you should be as relaxed as possible for the next six months!”

“Six months?” Ella repeated, feeling as though she was missing something. “Should I be stressed after that?”

“I think that’s unavoidable. Since you’ll have a new baby.” Sinclair quipped, catching

sight of her confused expression. “Shifter pregnancies are shorter than humans, around six months – that’s why the baby was so large at your ultrasound.”

“Oh.” Ella was still busy processing that detail when Sinclair excused himself for a phone call. Six months? She thought fearfully. That doesn’t give me nearly as much time to prepare.

Suddenly needing some fresh air, Ella went to the window and pulled it open, heaving in two very large lungfuls. The brisk winter air felt good on her flushed skin, even if opening the window had unleashed a torrent of sound on her ears. In the yard below men or wolves, she supposed – were sparring on a snow covered lawn. They violently clashed with bare hands and weapons, openly shouting, growling and laughing. The tumult was so uproarious that Ella was tempted to slam the window shut, but she didn’t want to lose the refreshing air.

Ella eyed the bell in her hand, curious to see if it really would bring Sinclair to her side – even in the middle of a business call. With a mischievous smile, she rang the bell and waited. Within thirty seconds, Sinclair was in front of her, looking down at her with amusement – as if he knew exactly what she was up to. “You rang?”

“Would it be possible for them to do... that,” Ella gestured at the commotion on the lawn, “somewhere else? It’s very loud.”

Without hesitation Sinclair leaned out the window and told the sparring sentries to go elsewhere, ordering them not to train outside this window anymore. Ella watched in amazement as the men immediately raced to obey – what must it be like to be so powerful that people fell over themselves to do your bidding? It struck her that Sinclair was the most powerful person in every room he walked into, yet here he was, deferring to her – doing whatever she asked.

“Thank you.” Ella murmured.

“You’re welcome.” Sinclair answered, still fighting his smile. The more time he spent with Ella, the more endearing he found the little human. In fact, it was enough to make him question everything he’d been thinking the last couple of days. He’d already ordered a second investigation into her background, and he could barely stand the thought of waiting two days for the results. He’d have to keep his distance until then, until he knew whether he could trust her – once and for all.

Two days. He thought impatiently, That’s nothing, you can easily stay away that long... right?

Chapter 12 – Investigate

Sinclair was sitting in his office, trying not to think about Ella.

Two days had dragged past at a snail's pace, and the Alpha was finding it more and more difficult to stay away from the pretty human. His wolf was driving him up the wall, constantly suggesting that they go and check on her, just to make sure she was alright.

It was ridiculous – he knew she was perfectly fine. The mischievous creature rang her bell every few hours, just to see if he'd come to her. In fact, he was starting to think the bell had been a bad idea. He was beginning to crave hearing it, hoping she would ring the damned thing so he could give in to his wolf and go see her.

Of course, every time it happened, Ella would scramble for some anemic excuse to explain the call – yet he was never bothered. Sinclair could tell she was just testing her limits and amusing herself, this was probably the first time in her life anyone had taken care of her, and he couldn't bear to spoil her fun.

Ella was so unlike his ex, Lydia, that it made his head spin. Sinclair had loved his mate and wanted to give her everything her heart desired, but she wasn't the most easy-going of she-wolves. Even before she'd shown her true colors and betrayed him, he'd known going through a pregnancy with her would be very difficult.

He could imagine her in Ella's shoes now, demanding every unreasonable extravagance she could imagine and complaining non-stop. She would have made a wondrous experience a trial – something not to relish but endure- whereas Ella was sweetly reveling in the magic of creating life, overwhelmed to find herself in comfort rather than constantly struggling.

Sinclair's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door, and he promptly called, "come in."

His heart leapt when the investigator he'd hired to look into Ella poked his head through the door, "Is now a good time, Alpha?"

"Yes." He agreed, more than eager to hear what the man had discovered.

"Well you were right." The investigator announced as he entered and plopped into the chair opposite Sinclair's. "I checked with the police, Ella Reina reported a stolen identity a couple of days after the insemination, and until a few months ago her financial history was perfectly sound."

Sinclair's wolf howled triumphantly in his head. I knew it! I knew she wasn't bad.

"Do the police have any leads?" Sinclair questioned.

“Oh she told them exactly who was responsible.” The investigator shared. “She claimed her ex-boyfriend had opened about a dozen credit cards in her name, and the story tracks. All of the credit cards she opened herself have no debt on them whatsoever.

She pays off her balance every month like clockwork, and all the charges are very modest. The new cards were maxed out almost immediately on luxury items which certainly weren't in her home based on your description. It's a completely different spending pattern. I think she was telling you the truth, at the time of the insemination, she didn't know she was in financial trouble.”

“Then how did my sperm end up getting switched with the donor she chose?” Sinclair questioned, beyond relieved to hear the mother of his pup was not another shallow, gold-digging schemer like Lydia.

“I don't know, but you said yourself she hasn't asked you for anything other than the right to stay with the baby. Her file at the clinic indicated she's been trying to get pregnant for years.” The investigator reasoned. “That doesn't sound like someone who set out to entrap you.”

Sinclair felt a pang deep in his chest. Like him, Ella had struggled with fertility for years, only to be betrayed by her partner. For all their differences, he was beginning to think they had more in common than they realized. However there was one thing he didn't understand, and he was tired of going through the investigator. It was time to get the story straight from the source... and this time he'd actually listen.

When he arrived at Ella's room, he found her curled up in the window seat with a sunbeam bathing her in golden light, sound asleep. She was wearing some of the silk pajamas he'd purchased for her when he saw her shabby sleep clothes on day one, and looked so sweet it actually hurt to look at her. He was reluctant to disturb her, knowing she needed her rest, and started to retreat. However the sound of his footsteps must have roused her, because a moment later Ella opened her eyes and yawned. Stretching like a sleepy kitten and offering him a welcoming smile. “Good morning.”

“I think you mean, good afternoon.” Sinclair teased, fighting the urge to brush the hair from her face. “How are you feeling?”..

Ella's stomach answered for her, growling pointedly and making her flush. “Sorry.”

“Don't apologize.” Sinclair insisted, “I'll get you something to eat. What would you like?”

Ella peeked up at him from beneath her lashes, “does it have to be healthy?”

Chuckling, Sinclair strode forward and knelt down beside her. He pressed one hug

palm to her belly, making her flinch. with surprise, then shushing her gently and petting her hair. “Shh, I just want to feel the baby.” He focused on the tiny being in Ella’s womb, trying to pick up on their developing mental link.

Once he did, he began laughing again, a rich cozy sound that wrapped Ella in warmth. “So, pickles and ice cream, is that it?”

“How did you know that!” Ella exclaimed, her eyes wide.

“All shifter parents have a mental link with their pups, even in the womb.” He explained.

“Is that why I can hear you in my head sometimes?” Ella questioned. “Like when I passed out, I swear I could hear you from inside me.” Sinclair nodded.

He was surprised that a human was able to pick up on it, but it was the only explanation. “That’s right. Now, sit tight and I’ll get your snack.” Ella was surprised that Sinclair planned on preparing it himself. She assumed he’d send a servant, if he’d even allow her to have something so unhealthy. He’d been so adamant about prenatal vitamins, exercise and care.

Apparently cravings were a different matter though — he must have understood how powerful the hunger was. When he returned, with a heaping bowl of ice cream and a plate of pickles, Ella almost wanted to hug him she was no grateful. Of course, she put that idea out of her head immediately. Dominic Sinclair was many things, but she seriously doubted he was a hugger.

Ella tucked into the snack, sighing with pleasure and making Sinclair grin... though it didn’t last for long. “I hate to ruin your good mood,” he began apologetically, “but I wanted to ask — why did you go to a sp3rm bank to get pregnant, if you didn’t know about your boyfriend’s betrayal until afterwards?”

Ella blinked, “You’ve decided you believe me about the debt, then?”

“My investigators took a closer look at your situation.” He agreed. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you at first... trust doesn’t always come easily for me.”

“I suppose I can understand that.” Ella answered, somewhat cryptically. Working up the courage to tell this intimidating man her story, she took a deep breath. “But I did know about Mike’s betrayal beforehand – just not the identity theft.

The truth is that he kept me around for years because... well, basically he wanted a trophy in his bed. All the time I was trying to get pregnant, he was sleeping with my best friend and giving me the morning after pill every morning in my coffee. I caught him in the affair the same day I learned that my eggs were so diminished that if I didn’t get

pregnant now, I never would.”

Tears were streaming down her face now, and she couldn't bring herself to look at Sinclair. Setting the ice cream down, she concluded. “So you see, this baby is my last chance... my only chance. That's why I went to Cora – I couldn't risk failing again.”

Before she knew what was happening, Sinclair had pulled her out of the window and into his arms. Suddenly Ella found herself cushioned by warm muscles on all sides. She was so completely enveloped in his embrace, she wasn't sure where she ended and he began. So much for not being a hugger. “I'm so sorry, Ella.” He rumbled against her hair.

She nodded pitifully, trying to hold herself together despite the growing temptation to let this strange man comfort her. He smelled so wonderful, and she felt so safe – safer than she could ever remember feeling, though that shouldn't be possible. After all, she barely knew the man and he'd caused her nothing but trouble. “I won't take the baby from you.” Sinclair declared then, astonishing Ella. “If I do find a new mate, you can have visitation rights.”

“Really?” Ella sniffled, not believing her ears.

“Yes. I'm sorry I've been so harsh.” Sinclair purred, stroking her spine.

That was all it took. The next thing Ella knew, she was sobbing her heart out into Sinclair's collar, while he rocked and soothed her. As gentle as he was with the fragile human, Sinclair was furious inside. He couldn't recall ever feeling so much rage for anyone.

His wolf was going berserk with the need to find and punish Ella's ex-boyfriend. He wanted to destroy the man who had broken her heart. She was the mother of his pup, and no one had the right to harm her.

Even as he held her, a plan formed in his mind. A plan to make Mike pay for his crimes. The police might not be able to help Ella, but he certainly could.

Chapter 13 – Pregnancy diet

Ella

This is confusing. It was much easier for me to hate Sinclair when he was being overbearing and bossy, I'm not sure what to make of all this kindness. It seems too good to be true, and that's a guaranteed red flag. I learned the hard way growing up as an orphan, if it seems too good to be true, it's because it is.

At the same time, I can't bring myself to pull away from Sinclair. He's still holding and rocking me more tenderly than I ever could have imagined. Has anyone ever held me this way? Mike certainly didn't, and while Cora has always comforted me in times of need, this does not feel like cuddling Cora. I'm aware of Sinclair's touch in a way that is far from sisterly, I feel as though I'm being scalded by his heat, and wonder if werewolves run higher temperatures than humans.

It strikes me quite suddenly that if Sinclair is half this attentive with his children, my baby will have more love than I could have possibly hoped for. He really will make a wonderful father – assuming this isn't some act to make me agree to some new condition on our agreement. Then again, I remember how kind he's always been to Jake and Millie, how obviously he loves children.

I'm not sure where it comes from, but suddenly I feel a rush of jealousy for the woman who will become his mate. She will be very lucky indeed, and it's obvious his sperm wasn't the problem with his past fertility struggles now. They'll probably have many children together, and my baby can have siblings to love and play with. I might not be able to have a big family, but my child will be part of one – and that's what's important, right? So why do I feel so bitter at the thought of another woman being with Sinclair?

I might suspect that a she-wolf would feel threatened by my baby, because it would prevent one of her own pups from becoming Sinclair's heir, but I know that's not it either. I snuggle closer as my tears slow, and Sinclair purrs, sending a delicious shiver down my spine. Why is it so hard to pull away from him? Why does the idea of leaving his arms make me so disappointed?

I can't be attracted to him. I can't. It's a recipe for disaster!

"What are you thinking about?" His deep voice sounds in my ear, and I jolt as if I've been shocked. I can feel myself coloring already, and when I look up at him, there's a knowing smirk on his face.

I try to conjure an excuse that would explain my embarrassment, so I confess a half truth, "I was thinking I want more ice cream."

Sinclair frowns now, eyeing the bowl I've just finished. "I think that might be overdoing it.

The doctor said you needed a very nutritious diet.”

The baby doesn't care for this, and neither do I. My craving hasn't been satisfied yet, and no one has ever deigned to tell me what I can or cannot eat. “I'm an adult, Sinclair. I can see to my own health.”

“I've asked you to call me Dominic.” He reminds me, catching me in the crosshairs of his piercing eyes.

“My point remains the same no matter what I call you.” I state tritely, pulling away from him at last. I slip off his knee and rise to my feet. His collar is soaked through with my tears, and though I'm standing and he's kneeling, he's still almost as tall as I am. I place my hands on my hips, trying not to cower in the face of his stern expression.

“What if I make you something else, what's your favorite dish?” Sinclair questions.

Rolling my eyes, I retrieve my bowl and circle around him, heading for the door. My fingers are inches from the handle when a tree trunk arm circles my middle and I'm lifted off my feet. “Hey! Put me down!”

“Such a naughty little human.” Sinclair clucks in disapproval, setting me down on the couch.

“You said I was free to go wherever I wish here.” I remind him. “I want to go to the kitchen.”

“You may go to the kitchen if you like,” He agrees, “but not if you're only going to fill up on ice cream. That baby needs more than sugar and fat to grow big and strong.”

The more this goes on, the more I feel like a child. Here I am, demanding sweets when I know it isn't best for my child, but I can't help the cravings I'm experiencing. The baby wants what it wants, and there's no reasoning with my hormones. They are stronger than any PMS or mood swing I've ever experienced before, it makes me feel like a different person. I'm a mature adult, I've been on my own my whole life – I raised myself and Cora, even though she's older. So why do I feel like crying again simply because I'm not going to get my way?

I'm still caught up in my thoughts when I feel calloused fingers stroke my cheek, drawing my attention up to Sinclair. “Has no one ever cared for you enough to set limits?” He asks, searching my face. In the wrong tone it might have sounded like a cruel reminder, but he speaks with true sympathy.

“I'm an orphan, remember?” I bite, my voice thick with emotion. “No one has ever cared for me at all – not the way you mean.”

“Well that changes now.” Sinclair proclaimed firmly, leaving no room for argument. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I remain in my room, trying to get hold of myself and wrap my brain around this strange new relationship with Sinclair. I feel very confused by his behavior, and my own feelings. My body is responding to him like it’s never responded to anyone – it feels as if I’ve come alive after a very long sleep – but I have to wonder whether that’s only the baby? Surely if there is such a strong bond between Sinclair and the pup that they have a mental link, I must be affected too.

I’m so lost in my thoughts that I almost don’t realize it when the man in question returns, carrying a tray. He sets it down in front of me and though I’m feeling contrary enough that I’m tempted to reject it on principle, that impulse evaporates as soon as he raises the cloche to reveal the meal he’s prepared. It’s macaroni and cheese with broccoli, not exactly healthy, but certainly better than ice cream. Not to mention, it’s my absolute favorite dish from childhood.

“How did you know?” I ask, astonished. This is not something he could have possibly learned from his link with the baby. It’s not a craving, but a personal fact very few people know.

“I have my ways.” Sinclair answers slyly, offering me a fork.

I accept it gladly, and wonder again at this mysterious man... wolf. There’s so much about him I don’t understand, things that have nothing to do with being a werewolf, and everything to do with his human side.

“What happened between you and your mate?” I ask, not sure if this is an appropriate question for me to ask, but deciding to test my luck. “When you said not all fated mates are good fits, were you talking about yourself?”

Sinclair blinks, and at first I don’t think he’ll answer, but after a moment he sighs and sits beside me. He leans forward and rests his elbows on my knees. “Yes.” He admits, watching me take my first bite of food with laser sharp focus. I moan with pleasure when the flavors hit my tongue, and some unreadable emotion flashes in his green eyes. “Lydia was beautiful, intelligent, and incredibly calculated. I don’t know if there was ever really love between us, or just the bond. We married because... that’s what you do when you find your mate. I knew she’d make a good Luna, and I wanted a family. I wanted to give her everything she desired – that’s the way it is with mates, even when the feelings are complicated, you feel compelled to make them happy.”

“Unfortunately what Lydia wanted was a baby.” Sinclair continued grimly. “And when I could not give her one, she left me for another Alpha – without a second thought. In the

end I'm not sure if she loved me, or my money and power. She was a very materialistic woman, and the status of being a Luna wasn't worth nearly as much if she didn't produce an heir."

"That's awful." I murmur, wanting to reach for his hand, but not feeling quite brave enough. "I'm so sorry."

Before he can respond, a woman's voice sounds on the other side of the door. "Knock knock!"

When Sinclair rises to open the door, I look at my phone and see a series of texts from Cora. Why did Dominic Sinclair just call me to ask your favorite meal? How are you? What's going on? Are you with him?

Well that's one mystery solved. I think. However I don't have time to dwell on it, because Sinclair is ushering a woman I don't recognize inside.

"Ah Aileen, come in." Sinclair invites, showing her into the room. "Ella this is Aileen, she's my Beta's wife, and she's going to teach you everything you need to play the part of a Luna."

As curious as I am about the role, I'm more curious about Sinclair. I want to keep talking, but he's already departing, and Aileen is offering me a wide smile. "Are you ready to begin?"

Chapter 14 – Purchase

Ella

For a moment I don't know how to answer the strange woman. Am I ready to begin learning how to be a queen? Is anyone ever?

That's the kind of job that takes a lifetime of preparation, and I still don't even recognize half the words these people are using.

"Am I supposed to know what a beta is?" I whisper to Aileen, watching Sinclair stride out the door with an unreadable expression on his face.

"A beta is like a second in command." She smiles warmly, coming forward and taking both of my hands in hers. Now that we're alone, she looks me over with an approving nod. "Well you are a stunning little thing, I have to say. When Sinclair explained the situation to us I wasn't sure what to think, but now that I see you it makes a bit more sense. Any man would be lucky to have your genes passed down to their pups."

I bristle at this statement. I don't mind the compliment, but after what happened with Mike, I'm not overly fond of people commenting on my looks. I've already had one man reduce all of my value to physical beauty, so I'm definitely not crazy about an entire society of werewolves looking at me through the same lens. Luckily if we pull this off, they'll all believe I'm a shifter, but I suspect there will still be some questions. I'll have to talk to Sinclair about giving me a good backstory.

"But being a beta is more than just a job, isn't it?" I say, pushing past the awkwardness of the abrupt subject change. "It's something you're born into?"

Aileen seems to notice my discomfort, and takes her hands away. "Well yes, all wolves are born as alphas, betas or omegas."

"And what do those things actually mean?" I press, not understanding.

"You can think about it like a class system, though it's more complicated than that. Every wolf is born into their role, and there isn't any way of changing it. Alphas are the strongest both physically and in personality. That's why they lead our packs, they are the only ones dominant enough to rule a lot of very powerful beings." Aileen shares.

"But not all Alpha's rule, do they?" I wonder aloud.

"No, only the strongest of the strong actually take control." She clarifies patiently.

"So Sinclair?" Why does his name feel so electric on my tongue, why does the mere thought of him send a shiver down my spine?

“Is the most powerful of the pack leaders. That’s why he’s campaigning to be king.” Aileen reveals.

“But why is it a campaign?” I inquire. “If it just comes down to brute strength.”

“Well in the old days they would just fight, but we’re more evolved now. Now we don’t just want a ruler who can beat the competition into the ground, we want someone intelligent and compassionate.” Aileen explains.

“I have a hard time thinking of Sinclair as compassionate.” I admit. He was certainly ruthless when it came to our dealings. Then again, a little voice says in the back of my head. He did hold you when you cried.

Aileen looks as though she’s reading my mind. “Don’t let Dominic fool you.” She advises. “He’s had a rough go of it with his mate. Trust me, once you get past all his walls and sharp edges, there’s a very loving man underneath.”

“I don’t think I’ll be the one to get past those things.” I murmur doubtfully.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” She muses. “You’re giving him a pup – after all this time.”

I don’t know what to make of this statement, and before I can consider it, Aileen is forging on ahead. “Now betas are born mediators. They aren’t so bossy as Alphas, so they don’t butt heads with the leader vying for control. They’re more mellow and even-tempered, they balance the Alpha out. That’s what my husband, Hugo, does for Dominic.”

“And omegas?” I ask.

“Omegas are on the bottom of the food chain, literally and figuratively. They’re smaller and weaker, and they have naturally submissive natures. They’re followers, not leaders.”

“So compared to a human,” I probe, “where would an omega stand?”

Aileen’s lip twitches, “All wolves are stronger, faster and have sharper senses than humans, no matter their rank. We’re different species, even the weakest wolf will be stronger than you.” She pauses thoughtfully. “I wonder how Dominic will cope with that.”

“What do you mean?” I question anxiously.

“Alpha’s are very protective, very possessive. He’s not going to like the idea that you’ll be so vulnerable among our kind.” She surmises, still halfway in her thoughts.

I can't focus on this at the moment however – it's not exactly news that Sinclair is bossy, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around the fact that magical creatures are real. "But how do shifters even exist?" I burst out. "I mean, do we have some common ancestor?"

"No, the goddess created us separate from humans." Aileen corrects gently.

Well this is new information. "The goddess?"

"The moon goddess, she rules over all creatures." Aileen informs me, as if this should be common sense.

"Why haven't I ever heard of her?" I ask, holding my hands to my head in confusion.

"Humans are more distant from the divine. You don't know about her, because you can't feel her magic and influence. We can."

Aileen states matter-of-factly.

"Gosh that's a lot to take in." I mutter, trying to imagine what it would be like to feel celestial power, to commune with the gods of creation somehow. I never believed such a thing was possible. I never even believed in a god – how could I? My life hasn't known many blessings. It's hard to believe in a higher power when all you know is suffering. While I'm lost in my thoughts, a young boy comes running through the door and Aileen catches him in a hug even as she scolds him.

"Naughty boy!" There was a huge smile on her face, and the child resembles her so clearly I know he must be her son. "You should know better than to enter a closed door without knocking!"

There's pure maternal joy shining off her face, and I have to wonder whether it's the first time they've seen each other that day, but when she speaks, it becomes clear that this is not the case. "Where's your father, I left you with him only ten minutes ago!"

"I know but I missed you." The boy grins up at his mother, and my heart melts in my chest. What must it be like to love someone so completely, to have such a powerful bond to another being? I want it so badly it hurts.

It's still so surreal to think I'm really pregnant after all this time, that it takes me a moment to remember I don't have to long hopelessly anymore. I'm going to have that kind of love soon. I press my hand to my belly with excitement. I can't wait until my next check up, until I can hear that tiny heart beat again, and see the baby in a sonogram. Sinclair is taking me this afternoon –

to a shifter doctor this time – and I'm counting down the minutes now more than ever.

Thump thump thump.

Has there ever been a more beautiful sound than my baby's heartbeat? If there has, I've certainly never heard it. This appointment is so different from my last one. Instead of Sinclair towering over me lobbing threats and accusations, he's by my side, staring at the ultrasound screen with the widest smile I've ever seen on his face – completely transfixed.

I know exactly how he feels. These last few days I've felt like a higher power myself. I'm creating life inside me and it's nothing short of a miracle. In the moments I can forget my troubles, I'm giddy with happiness. I didn't realize how low my hope had fallen until I felt such disbelief at finally becoming pregnant.

"I never thought this day would come." I didn't mean to say the words, but they fall from my tongue as fresh tears burn in my eyes – tears of joy this time.

Sinclair's face turns away from the screen for the first time, his brilliant green eyes landing on my face as a tender smile takes over his features. His massive hand slides around my crown, gently cradling my head as he lowers his brow to mine, until they're resting against each other.

"It's real." He whispers to me, and I nod happily, taking comfort in his protective hands.

"Hmm." The doctor mutters, breaking our revelry.

"What, is something wrong?" I ask anxiously. Sinclair's thumb immediately begins brushing back and forth across my hair, instinctively soothing my fraying nerves.

"The baby's just a bit small for my liking." He tells us, making my heart race with worry.

Both men hear it immediately on the machines surrounding us, and Sinclair shushes me softly. "That's not necessarily bad, is it?"

"Well babies develop at different rates, but for a man of your size and strength, I would have expected a larger fetus." The doctor shares.

My hands are shaking, but Sinclair doesn't seem bothered. He snorts, "They told my mother the same exact thing when she was carrying me, and I turned out fine. She was little, like you." He adds warmly, "your body is doing it's best, it needs to fatten up a bit before it can support a bigger baby."

I have to fight the urge to laugh, and instead bat my lashes at him. "Then you should let me have all the ice cream I want."

Sinclair tosses his head back and laughs, "You are incorrigible." He remarks wryly. "What am I going to do with you at the campaign dinner tomorrow?"

"Campaign dinner?" I repeat, confused.

"Yes, didn't I tell you?" He looks genuinely surprised, or I might be more upset. "Tomorrow it's out of the frying pan and into the fire for our plan. I need you by my side. "

Chapter 15 – Learn werewolf

Ella

“What!” I exclaim, unable to wrap my head around this idea. “But I’m not ready!”

“You will be.” He promises. “Aileen will keep working with you tomorrow, and then we’ll go shopping so you can look the part. It’s only a meal, no one is going to be quizzing you on werewolf politics.”

“I don’t know.” I fret, “what if I say the wrong thing?”

“I’ll be with you the whole time.” Sinclair vows. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you put your foot in your mouth.”

This does make me feel better, but I’m still woefully far from feeling confident in my ability to pass as a completely different species. “Can’t we wait a little while?” I request anxiously. “I promise I’ll never miss another event, I just need a little more time.”

“Ella, the elections are in three months.” Sinclair says softly. “We don’t have much time to waste. Very few people change their minds at the last moment. My image has been marked with controversy from day one because I don’t have a family.”

“I don’t understand, why is that so controversial if the King is something people vote on. It’s not like having an heir is going to decide the future of succession.”

“Because it’s not about succession. It’s about personal stability. Unmated Alphas are viewed as being more temperamental and aggressive. If I have a mate and a pup however, people will view me as more grounded and cautious.” Sinclair explains.

“Is that true?” I ask, “that unmated alphas are wilder?”

Sinclair grimaces but nods, “To a degree, yes. Some men are more or less aggressive naturally, but it makes a difference when you have someone to take care of – someone who might be harmed if anything happened to you.”

“Okay, so you’re saying it has to be tomorrow?” I surmise, “the sooner you turn your image around, the better.”

“That’s right.” Sinclair agrees. “As long as you’re well enough, I need you there.”

“And you promise you won’t leave my side?” I question.

“You have my word.” He vows.

“Okay then.” I concur, not feeling half as confident as I sound.

The doctor – who by now has finished his exam – steps out, leaving me with Sinclair to change clothes before we check out.

However Sinclair doesn’t leave, he stays in the exam room as if he expects me to change in front of him.

“Aren’t you going to...?” I trail off, hoping he’ll pick up on my train of thought without me saying more.

“To what?” He asks, a knowing smile on his handsome face.

“I can’t change in front of you.” I protest, my cheeks going bright pink. “I’m only wearing underwear beneath this thing.”

His brow furrows, but there’s a devious glint to his intense eyes which makes me think he knows exactly what I mean. “Human modesty.” He clucks his tongue and shakes his head. “So prudish, you’ll see soon enough, wolves aren’t nearly as repressed.”

“I’m not a prude! Or repressed!” I defend hotly, climbing down from the table and regretting it instantly. A second ago I was equal to Sinclair in height, now he towers over me. .

“The Goddess made our bodies perfect as they are, why would we hide them?” He questions silkily, the same devilish smile on his face.

Narrowing my eyes at the big man, I grumble, “fine.” Whipping the gown off over my head, I stomp over to the corner where I left my clothes neatly folded. I tug them on quickly, but not so quickly that Sinclair will think I’m embarrassed about being exposed before him. When I turn back, he looks mildly impressed.

“I didn’t think you’d actually go through with it.” He confesses. “But I’m sure glad you did.”

I notch my chin up defiantly. “I don’t back down that easily. You might have seven senses or whatever, but it will take more than that to figure me out.”

His smirk only grows as he closes the distance between us, invading my space with his powerful presence. “I can’t wait.”

“What do you think?” I ask a few hours later, as I stand in front of a full length mirror in a

gown which costs more than my apartment.

"I prefer the green one." Sinclair responds thoughtfully, his penetrating gaze running up and down my body as I try on yet another dress.

I don't know how to feel about this shopping trip. I'm enamored by the stunning clothes around us, but it seems so extravagant to spend so much on material things. I'm only too aware that orphans are starving in this very city, wouldn't the money be better spent on charity?

I say as much to Sinclair, but he only smiles at me. How has our relationship changed so quickly? A couple of days ago he only glared at me, now he always seems to look at me fondly. "Did you find nothing about my finances when you were snooping?"

"Research is not snooping." I answer tritely. However then the memory rises, and I recall that he gives at least half his fortune to the less fortunate. "If you still have this much to spend on mere clothes after giving away so much, maybe you should give more."

Sinclair shocks me completely. He nods thoughtfully. "Maybe I should." I can only blink, Mike never listened to my advice – or indeed anything I said – with so much attention. It's only now that I see what true consideration is like, that I realize just how deficient he was as a partner.

Trying to shake myself out of my thoughts, I change the subject. "So the green one?" I confirm, knowing precisely the dress to which he's referring. It's the same emerald shade as his eyes, and studded with gemstones and rose gold accents that precisely match my hair.

He nods. "It suits you, besides, it covers your shoulders."

"Why should that matter?" I question in confusion.

"Because I haven't marked you, and I don't want people to notice." He explains.

"Marked me?" I squeak, not understanding what this means.

"I take it Aileen didn't get that far?" He guesses, rising from the dressing room chair and prowling towards me. My pulse spikes as he approaches, and suddenly I realize why I'd felt like a rabbit facing a wolf when I went to plead Cora's case with him. That's basically what we are, he could snap me up in one bite, and I'd be helpless to stop him. "A mark," He begins, hooking his finger under the spaghetti strap of my gown and tugging it off my shoulder, "Is the way a wolf claims his mate."

I gulp, too focused on Sinclair to fully process his works. "Mark how?"

"It's a bite, right here." His traces a finger over the spot where my neck meets my shoulder. "A deep bite, one that leaves his scent permanently on her skin."

"I – doesn't that hurt?" I fret.

Sinclair laughs, a dark, husky sound. "No sweet Ella, not if you time it right."

"Time it right with what?" I inquire innocently, furrowing my brow.

The next thing I know, Sinclair's eyes are glowing with his wolf, and my knees go weak. "Maybe I'll explain it to you one day. In the meantime I'll just scent mark you." He remarks cryptically. "Now stay there, I'm going to fetch one more dress to try."

When he steps away, I realize just how attuned I am to his presence. I wasn't aware of any of my other surroundings when he was near. He consumed my attention completely, barring all else.

Once he's gone I notice a pretty blue frock on one of the racks just outside the dressing room. I move to examine it, but as soon as I take the dress from the rack, a second set of hands lands on the hanger and tries to yank it out of my hands. "Hey, I saw that first!"

The woman in front of me is blonde and pretty, but sneering with an awful expression. She pulls so hard on the hanger that I start to lose my balance. She must be a shifter, I think, she's too strong to be a human. At this point, I'm only hanging onto the dress because it's the only thing holding me upright, but the woman is soon trying to pry my hands free. "I said let go!"

I'm about to simply give up and fall to the ground, when a pair of powerful hands catch my waist, guiding my feet back to the ground.

"Take your hands off of her, right now!" Sinclair barks, his snarling voice silencing everyone in the store. The petty woman releases me quickly, seeming to shrink into herself in the face of the infuriated alpha. "I'm so sorry, Alpha." She apologizes. "I didn't know she was with you."

"That shouldn't matter." He declares, coming to my side. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I insist, but before I can say more, another man speaks from behind us.

"Brother, don't tell me you're attacking defenseless woman now." The shifter speaking turns his attention to me now. "And who's this?"

Chapter 16 – Brother

Ella

The stranger looks a lot like Sinclair, and the word “brother” strikes my interest. If they’re siblings, why is Sinclair looking at him so harshly? They don’t seem friendly at all.

“This is Ella.” Sinclair announces, sliding his arm around my waist. “My future mate, and the mother of my pup.”

“Our pup.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. I’m not sure why I said it, but the way Sinclair declared the pups as his – as if it belonged to him and not me – brought out my maternal instincts. I even growled a little as I staked my claim, making Sinclair’s lips quirk with amusement.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” The man scoffs. “I’ve never seen or heard of you before, I didn’t have the faintest idea my brother was expecting, and he hasn’t even marked you.” I realize he’s right. Sinclair had mentioned scent marking me before the campaign dinner – whatever that means – but he hasn’t done it yet. Luckily his pup’s presence is strong enough to make me smell like a wolf, but this man clearly isn’t fooled by our pretense as a couple. “Let me guess, he just picked you up off the street because you make such a pretty womb?”

A low rumble is vibrating against my side as Sinclair’s wolf begins to growl. Meanwhile I flush with embarrassment, it’s not the truth, but it’s close enough to make me want to hide behind Sinclair’s strength and dominance. Where did that come from? The little voice in my head asks. You’ve never hidden from a problem or backed down from a challenge a day in your life. That’s true, but then again, I’ve never had anyone to hide behind before.

The man is still speaking, making fun of my naivete for expecting Sinclair to honor my role as our baby’s mother. “And you actually think he’ll keep you around once you squirt the kid out? Clearly brains and beauty don’t go hand in hand.”

“Clearly ugliness and cynicism do.” I bite back, feeling bolstered by Sinclair’s steady presence at my side. “If you ask me the fact that you haven’t heard about me says more about your low status than my own. You’re obviously not important enough to warrant the Alpha’s time.”

Sinclair chuckles darkly, giving me a small squeeze to show his approval. “She has a point, Roger.”

The man, Roger, glares at his brother before offering me a look that almost appears pitying. “Mark my words, he’ll toss you to the curb at the first opportunity.”

I notch my chin up, "You underestimate me, and Dominic." I announce, feeling a thrum of excitement to speak his given name for the first time. I think it's actually coming from the baby, as if I can feel Sinclair's pleasure to hear me saying it through our pup.

"He has more honor in his little finger than you do in your entire body. That much is obvious and I've only just met you."

Roger opens his mouth to argue back, but Sinclair stops him. "Roger, give it a rest. Show some respect to your future Luna."

"Really Dominic, you're going to keep up this act?" He counters fiercely. "How did you even manage this, aren't you sterile? How do you know the brat she's carrying is even yours?"

In a flash Roger is suspended in the air, with Sinclair's huge hand circling his throat, holding him aloft. He squirms and tugs at Sinclair's white knuckled fingers, but I don't think he's truly afraid because he shoots me a triumphant smirk. "More honorable, huh?" Roger quips. "You certainly have an interesting definition."

"Do not speak about my pup that way." Sinclair snarls, "I know it's mine because we are bonded already, and I will be bonded to Ella after our formal mating ceremony. If anyone needs to learn some manners, it's you."

Roger shrugs. "What do you expect, we never had a mother." He shoots another scathing look in my direction, "It's a shame your pup won't either. You could at least have the dignity to be honest with her."

Before I can keep track, Sinclair has dropped him to the floor. "Get out, before I really lose my temper."

Roger clammers to his feet and calls over the blonde woman who fought me over the blue dress. "Come on, Sasha, we're leaving." Before they depart however, Roger offers his brother one final scowl. "You miscalculated badly today, brother. What do you think the Alpha council is going to say when they find out you attacked your own family in broad daylight – over nothing more than a few honest words? The council wants a stable king, not a loose cannon. Clearly that pup hasn't done a damn thing to even you out. Just you wait, your campaign is going to be over by the end of tomorrow's dinner."

Part of me wants to run after Roger and kick him right in the behind, I can't believe what just happened. I don't blame Sinclair either, I don't think his aggression had anything to do with being unmated, I think it was because he feels so protective of his pup, and by extension – me. Besides, his brother has to know what a sore spot his fertility struggles are. How cruel does a person have to be to bring up such a thing.

"I'm sorry about that, Ella." Sinclair's attention is already back on me. "I shouldn't have lost control that way."

"If I'd been strong enough to attack him, I would have done it myself." I confide, leaning into his warmth. His energy is still very agitated, and all my instincts are driving me to comfort him the same way he's comforted me today. "What did you mean about a mating ceremony?"

"Oh," He shakes his head, brushing the topic aside. "That's just for show during the election. I don't expect you to actually go through with it. It's simply a way of explaining to people why you don't bear my mark."

"Oh." I murmur. Why does that disappoint me so much? I know Sinclair is handsome, but we're different species and he's completely controlling, I can't truly be attracted to him – can I?

Even as I think it, I breathe in his scent, and feel heat begin to pool low in my belly. Snap out of it! I scold myself. That's just the baby, it wants to be near its father. It's just another wolfy mindlink thing... isn't it?

I look up to Sinclair to make sure he's not watching me struggle to untangle these confusing feelings, and for once, his attention is very far away. My relief immediately gives way to sympathy as I take in his distant expression. "Don't be offended – but your brother is an asshole." I say gently.

Sinclair looks down at me, his grim features softening to a smile. "You can say that again."

"Do you want to talk about it?" I press, curious but not wanting to intrude on his private business.

"Oh," He sighs, dragging a hand through his hair. "Roger and I... we're very different people – as you saw. We've never gotten along."

"Why not?" I inquire.

Sinclair's face darkens, and I worry that I've pushed into such sensitive territory that he'll refuse to tell me any more, however he surprises me again. "I took his mother away from him. She died protecting me, and he's never forgiven me. There was already bad feelings between us – he's older, but I was always stronger. It was clear from a young age that I, and not he, would be my father's heir. So there was always jealousy and competition – then Mom sacrificed herself for me, and that was it."

"I'm so sorry." I express, intuitively wrapping my arms around him for a hug. I can tell

he's surprised, I don't think many people instigate hugs with the future king, but I'm not a wolf, and all I see is a man in need of affection in front of me. His arms come around me in reply, and his voice purrs in my ear. "You really are full of surprises, you know that?"

"What's so surprising?" I ask against his chest, using the excuse to breathe in his delicious scent again. "You hugged me when I needed it – why shouldn't I return the favor?"

"I'm just used to taking care of others, that's all." He shares. "And I don't know anyone brave enough to touch me without permission."

"And here I thought wolves were supposed to be all tough and brave." I joke, pressing my nose to his pec. "They sound like a pack of scaredy-cats to me."

Sinclair laughs, sounding like a completely different man than the haunted creature he'd been a moment ago. "You know, if you keep this up I'm not going to be able to wait until tomorrow to scent mark you."

I'm getting ahead of myself now, feeling overconfident amidst his praise and safe to poke his buttons now that his horrible brother has gone away. "Why are you?"

"Because I want it to be strongest before the campaign dinner." Sinclair explains.

"It wears off?" I ask, putting two and two together.

"Your scent is getting so strong sometimes I forget how little you know about our ways. Did Aileen explain anything about this to you?" He questions.

"No – I think she was more concerned with teaching me political things."

His eyes light up, though I don't know why. "So you don't even know what scent marking is?"

"No." I flush, waiting for him to continue. When he doesn't I prompt, "are you going to tell me?"

"No." He replies slyly. "I'm going to show you."

Chapter 17 – Preparation

Some of my confidence has waned on the ride home. Sinclair has been so mysterious about this scent marking business, and I don't like the way he keeps looking at me – as if I'm some prey to be devoured.

There's still so much I don't understand about this world, like how carrying his child can make me smell more like a wolf myself, or how someone can leave a mark which must be sensed and smelled, rather than seen with the naked eye. Not for the first time, I'm jealous of shifters' heightened abilities. The more time that passes, the more enchanted I am by the idea of transforming, of letting out one's inner animal and being truly wild and free. I don't know why I like the idea so much – it's not like I have an inner animal to release, so I'm not actually missing out.

"You look nervous." Sinclair observes, resting one proprietary hand on my knee as the car speeds along. Of course, his touch only makes me more antsy.

"You can fix that." I suggest, "it doesn't have to be a surprise."

"True, but it's much more fun this way." He smirks.

"Fun for you maybe." I mutter mutinously. "Besides, if you want your scent to be strongest tomorrow, shouldn't we wait?"

"And deprive myself of the opportunity to do it a second time?" He arches a brow, "why on earth would I do that?"

"I..." I don't know what to make of this. If he were anyone else I'd think he was flirting with me, but that's not possible. Wolves and humans don't mix. Maybe he simply enjoys teasing me, like a cat toying with a mouse. He certainly enjoys making me squirm. I realize this must be the reason, and suddenly I find myself feeling very indignant. I don't like the idea of being some plaything to the hungry predator. I narrow my eyes at him. "Maybe I won't let you." I decide.

The hand on my knee tightens, but not enough to hurt. "What was rule number one, little human?"

"That I should be as relaxed and happy through my pregnancy, so you shouldn't be making me nervous." I reason, knowing full well he expects me to confirm that he – as Alpha – is in charge.

"You forget I have a link straight to our pup, I know when you're stressed, and when you're just making mischief." Sinclair rumbles. "But if you want more justification for doing it often, it's to avoid scenes like what just happened. If people can't see your shoulder and also smell me on you very powerfully, they can be fooled into thinking I

have marked you. We can give the mating ceremony excuse to those who ask, but it would be better to avoid the questions altogether.”

A little while later, Sinclair is standing in front of me in my room, looking so powerful and attractive I'm almost too distracted to hear him speak. “Take off your clothes.” He instructs.

“What, all of them?” I squeak.

“You can keep your underwear on, but it's better if we're skin-to-skin.” He says, unbuttoning his own shirt.

I watch with wide eyes as he strips down to his boxer-briefs, taking in the sight of his muscular body and feeling my jaw go slack.

I've never seen anyone so rugged and chiseled.

“Do I need to take them off for you?” He asks, arching a brow and stepping forward.

“What? No!” I yelp, reminding myself that he's already seen me in my bra and panties. Taking a deep breath, I carefully lift my dress over my head, bracing myself for whatever is to come next.

Standing beside Sinclair in a ball gown, done up from head to toe in makeup, jewelry and heels, it seems hard to believe Sinclair was rubbing his mostly naked body all over me an hour ago. Scent marking – I've learned – is a deeply intimate act, one that confuses me more than I care to admit.

Yesterday when he marked me the first time, he took it slow and explained every step of the process, making sure I understood why it was so important to impart his scent on every inch of my body. This second time, however, was completely different. There were no explanations, no soothing caresses for my frazzled nerves. He came to me with a mission in mind, and slowly, sensuously covered me in his pheromones. If he noticed my body's response to his attentions – my aching breasts and liquid arousal, he gave no indication.

Now those feelings are long gone, as we're finally at the campaign dinner I've been preparing for non-stop over the last 48

hours. Sinclair quizzed me in the car on the way over, testing my knowledge of shifter society and nodding with approval when I smoothly answered each of his prompts. He hasn't said a word otherwise, which tells me just how much tension he's carrying in anticipation of the event.

When we arrive at an incredible palace, I can't keep my jaw from dropping to the floor. "I've never seen such a beautiful estate."

"This is where our pup will be raised if my campaign is successful." He shares, "The King's Palace."

"Why is the current King stepping down?" I ask as we climb the marble stairs, mostly trying to distract myself from all the flashing cameras and reporters screaming out to get Sinclair's attention.

"Alpha Dominic, over here!"

"Alpha Dominic, who's your date?"

"It wasn't his choice." Sinclair shares. "He's getting old and is no longer the strongest among us. The alpha council voted to force him to abdicate."

"Does he not have heirs of his own?" I question, trying my best to smile and wave at the crowd vying for attention around us.

"His eldest son is my biggest competition – and he would be a disaster." Sinclair intimates, ducking his head low enough that his lips brush the shell of my ear. "You're doing brilliantly by the way – look at them all, eating out of the palm of your hand."

I giggle quietly, feeling a wave of appreciation for the support. Normally I would be beside myself with nerves to walk into a room like this, surrounded by rich and powerful people – shifters. However next to Sinclair, the blatant stares and avid attention doesn't bother me. I feel confident by his side, even as I'm bowled over by his raw power. I didn't realize how much of it he keeps reined in on a day-to-day basis. Now however I can feel it viscerally, flowing off of him in a riptide of authority.

Before I know it, we've left the reporters behind and are crossing the ballroom to a pair of thrones at the end of a great hall. The throngs of people part to let us pass, and I have to admit – I do feel like royalty. No one has ever shown me so much respect or admiration.

I'm still reveling in the attention we're drawing when we stop in front of the King and Queen. They're both incredibly impressive.

The king's hair is streaked with gray, but he still has an air of unquestionable strength. His Luna is lovely and dignified, with features that hint to great beauty in her younger years.

Sinclair nods to each of them, while I dip into a curtsy. "Alpha Dominic," The king greets

Sinclair with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Dare I say you've finally found a mate?"

"That's right." Sinclair announces, loudly enough for all to hear. "And the Goddess has blessed us with a pup."

"Well I must say you have excellent taste. You, my dear, are an incredible beauty." The Luna smiles, no more genuinely than her husband. "Congratulations to you both!"

The announcement prompts a rush of supporters to gather around us both, and before I even realize it's happened, Sinclair is no longer beside me, we're separated by a few people, but I can still see him, so I try not to panic. "You must tell us your name!" A small throng of women gush in front of me.

"I'm Ella." I share, unsure whether I should use my own surname, or his. "Soon to be Sinclair." I lie, deciding to stick with our cover.

They squeal with excitement, and more people swirl around me, until at last I'm faced by an imposing looking man. He's watching me sharply, almost with suspicion. "Tell me, Ella, where are you from? How is it we've never seen you before?"

"I come from the Shadow Pack, in the north." I explain, repeating the lie Sinclair and I agreed upon. "I was in town visiting my cousin when I met Sinclair, and the rest is history."

"Oh, what cousin?" He asks, zeroing in on the detail.

"Aileen Corentin." I bluff, smiling widely.

"As in the wife of Dominic's beta?" He presses. "And you only met him recently?"

"Yes – our families are deeply estranged. Bad blood you know, divided allegiances and all that." I explain. "I only recently learned I had a cousin here, but once I did I reached out so we could meet."

"Hmm," He murmurs thoughtfully. "Still you must have been here some time, if you're already breeding."

"Not long at all." I correct him, "but you know how it is when you find the one... or maybe you don't. I didn't believe in love at first sight myself, until I found Dominic." I beam towards the man in question, trying to look as if I'm head over heels in love.

It must have worked, because he excuses himself and slips away into the crowd, a thoughtful expression on his face.

I watch him stride away, hoping Sinclair will return to my side soon. I can't explain why, but I feel that wasn't the last I'll see of that man, and I don't want to be alone the next time he finds me.

Chapter 18 – Campaign dinner

Ella

Where is Sinclair? I think nervously, scanning the room. He promised he wouldn't leave my side. Why did I ever let myself get separated from him. The crowd around me is still bombarding me with questions, and though I think I'm putting up a good front, I can't help but feel overwhelmed. My pulse is racing, and the blood is rushing in my ears. I'm not ready for this. I've only had two days to prepare, surely they're going to see right through my act!

I'm getting more and more light headed by the minute, and my stomach is beginning to churn. I think I'm going to be sick, but I'm not sure if it's morning sickness, or my nerves. I might be excited about the idea of the baby making its presence known, but this is the last place I want to get sick.

I turn in place, searching the room for any kind of restroom. I can't ask any of the aristocrats around me, speaking about such a private matter with people of this stature would be considered incredibly inappropriate. However before I can figure out a possible retreat, I see Sinclair striding through the crush of shifters, his brow furrowed as he watches me.

The people around me disappear when he finally closes the distance between us, and I'm amazed to feel my nausea and my nerves settle as soon as I breathe in his scent and feel his warm presence. "Are you alright?" He asks with concern, brushing the hair out of my face.

Though I feel far better than I did a moment ago, I'm still terribly overwhelmed. My lower lip trembles, and I wonder if I'm really so stressed that I might cry, or if it's just my pregnancy hormones spinning out of control. I don't want to show weakness in front of Sinclair, I don't want him to think I'm not up to playing this role. I not only have to prove myself to all these strangers, but to the father of my child. I plaster a wide smile across my face. "I'm fine."

He narrows his eyes, sidling closer and dipping his head to my ear. "Are you being honest, sweet Ella?"

I bristle at this prompt. Who is he to demand honesty about my feelings? If I don't want to talk about them, that's my choice. I'm about to tell him as much, when his low growl ricochets through my body, and the words spill unwillingly from my lips. "It's just a bit of morning sickness." I explain in a whisper, "I think the crowd made me overheat."

"And?" He presses, clearly sensing that there's more to the story.

I don't not like how easily he can read me. Either that means I'm failing in my act, or his

connection to our pup is giving him an unfair advantage sensing my emotions. To be honest, I'm not sure which possibility frightens me more. Still, I can't stop myself from speaking, though I refuse to look him in the eyes. "I got nervous." I can feel myself flushing at the admission, "you promised you wouldn't leave my side." I add petulantly, glaring up at him from beneath my lashes Sinclair's demanding growls soften to a purr, and the next thing I know, he's tucking me to his chest, stroking his hand down my spine in a soothing caress. "Poor little mate." He murmurs, no doubt for the people around us who might overhear. "I'm sorry I've been neglecting you."

I can hear the crowd oohing and ahing at the display, an Alpha caring for his mate. Is that why he's doing this? Does he actually care about my feelings, or is he just putting on a show? It must be the latter, I decide, otherwise he wouldn't ever call me his mate.

"How sweet." I recognize the voice immediately. It belongs to the same man who was questioning me with such suspicion a little while ago. "Breeding women can be so needy, can't they, Alpha Dominic?"

A growl rises in my defense, but to my surprise, it doesn't come from Sinclair – it comes from me! I don't think I've ever growled in my life. Is that the pup's influence? Sinclair probably thinks it's part of my act, trying to pass myself off as a she-wolf, but I didn't intend to do it at all!

A few chuckles pass through the crowd, though I don't know why. I feel completely serious, but I hear murmurs describing my cuteness. The other man blinks, looking up at Sinclair as if he expects him to chastise me. "My apologies, your highness."

Sinclair states simply. "She's a fierce little thing at the best of times." The words sound like an excuse for my behavior, but his tone is full of praise and his arms tighten around me affectionately.

Too late, his address for the other man filters through my brain. Your Highness. That must mean this is the prince, and Sinclair's main opponent in the election. It's no wonder I found him so imposing, or why he resembles the King so much.

"Well, what more could we want in a Luna." The Prince remarks, not sounding like he means a single word of this. "In fact, your loving display has inspired me! What's say we play a game, to celebrate your new family?"

"What kind of game do you have in mind?" Sinclair's muscles tensed, but his reply tells me saying no isn't really an option here.

After all, the entire point of this evening is to sell our relationship to the Alpha council. They're supposed to believe we're madly in love and overjoyed to be starting our family. We're being tested now, and backing down from the challenge would be a mistake.

“My own special version of the newlywed game.” The Prince gives us a sly grin. “To test the mating bond.”

I try to stay calm, but inside I’m panicking. We don’t have a mating bond, how on earth are they going to test it? We’re sure to fail, and at the very first hurdle! I look up at Sinclair for guidance, but he’s smiling at the Prince, calling his bluff. “As you wish.”

The Prince guides us towards the dais before the king and queen, placing me on one side, and Sinclair on the other. “Now the object of the game is simple.” The Prince explains, raising his voice so the entire audience can hear. “Ella and Dominic will communicate with each other through their bond, and afterwards they’ll both have to write out what the other expressed without consulting one another verbally. If their responses match perfectly, we’ll know they’re a strong couple.”

The implications are obvious, if our responses don’t match, we’ll look like a disconnected, weak couple – not the united Alpha and Luna we should be. Oh god, we’re going to fail! I think anxiously. Sinclair’s bond to the baby is strong, but the baby is so little that their mental link is still dependent on him touching me. I could hear Sinclair’s voice when I was passed out in his arms, and he could hear the pup’s craving when his hand was on my belly. Otherwise it hasn’t happened.

I look to Sinclair, but he seems completely unconcerned. Then again, I have no doubt he’s very good at hiding his emotions after spending so long in the public eye. Indeed, his face is a perfect mask, and as our eyes meet, I try to listen with all my might, praying that somehow his bond to the pup will spark to life even at this distance.

After a moment I realize it’s no use. I don’t have the first idea what he’s trying to communicate to me, so I do the only thing I can think of. I cross the dais swiftly and throw myself into the huge Alpha’s arms. I slide my arms around his neck as he catches me, and press my lips to his.

Sinclair purrs, locking me to him with one strong arm and catching the back of my head with the other, holding me in place so his talented lips can plunder my mouth. I might have instigated the kiss, but he takes charge immediately, drawing tiny whimpers from me as his tongue teases my lips and then delves inside. Fireworks explode behind my eyes as butterflies burst to life in my tummy.

I’ve never been kissed like this before, with so much skill and dominance that it feels as though he’s reaching inside me and touching my very soul. I’ve also never felt this kind of electricity with any partner. It’s as if my entire body is on fire, and he’s barely even begun. My feet are hovering around his knees, and I remember Sinclair’s remark about humans being prudish, so I wrap my legs around his waist as best I can through my voluminous skirts.

It's not until he pulls back, finally snapping me out of my daze, that I remember we're not alone. While his lips were on mine I wasn't aware of anything but the two of us, but now I realize cheers and wolf whistles are egging us on all sides. The crowd seems to love our display, but when I open my eyes again I find Sinclair's dark gaze boring into me so forcefully my heart stops beating completely.

Uh-oh, I think I might have just made a huge mistake.

Chapter 19 – A kiss

3rd Person

Ella slowly untangled herself from Sinclair's body as he returned her feet to the ground, feeling terribly unsure of herself. The audience was still making a huge racket, but the imposing Alpha was studying her as if she was some sort of curious anomaly –

one he was desperate to figure out. Her cheeks were flushed scarlet, but she followed his lead. Sinclair hadn't looked away from her to acknowledge their onlookers – so she didn't either.

Ella couldn't have known how much more meaningful it was for Sinclair to be watching her this way, rather than smiling. Shifters were creatures of raw passion and intense feeling, there were many lighthearted moments of course, but the look of a successfully mated Alpha and Luna was not the lovesick expressions humans so often displayed in relationships. To those around them, Sinclair's laser focus on the little human looked like a devoted lover hungry for his mate, and her anxious energy was only further proof – a she-wolf who had just provoked her mate's lust in public, and was going to have to face the consequences when she got home.

The tableau only made them cheer louder, and this eased Ella's fears a bit. Sinclair might not be happy with her, but the crowd certainly was. It can't have been a complete mistake, could it?

"How lovely, but not exactly the point of the game." The Prince's drawling criticism finally broke the spell, at last tearing Ella and Sinclair's attention away from one another.

"Wasn't it?" Ella asked innocently, feeling less intimidated by the Prince than the wolf still holding her in an iron grip. "He told me to kiss him – was I supposed to refuse?"

The spectators laughed and applauded, and Sinclair turned glowing eyes in their direction. "No doubt you'll forgive us taking our leave." He declared rakishly, earning a fresh surge of wolf whistles. "My mate is in need of some attention."

Ella blinked, wondering if he meant what she suspected. Were wolves really so open about sex? Before she could think about the matter any further, the King stood and offered them a toast, "To the happy couple."

Sinclair led Ella back through the flood of congratulations and well wishes, past the media frenzy and back into the safety of his limousine.

She slid into the far end of the vehicle, hiding from all the camera flashes behind blacked out windows. When Sinclair slid in a moment afterwards, he zeroed in on Ella immediately. The corner of his mouth tilted up when he saw her sitting as far away as

possible. "Is there a reason you're all the way over there?"

"Are you angry?" Ella murmured in reply, wrapping her arms protectively around her middle. She was painfully aware that if she messed up badly enough, it might cost her the baby.

"How could I be angry?" Sinclair exclaimed, truly shocked. "Ella, you saved the day. That was brilliant. None of the Alphas on the council will question me now. Even the King liked you. My campaign is safe because of your quick thinking."

"Oh," she relaxed slightly, feeling silly now. "You looked so severe after the kiss, I just... I thought I messed up."

"Far from it." Sinclair announced as the car slowly began to move. "But I am curious what inspired you to kiss me."

Ella stared at her lap. "It was the first thing that came into my mind. I knew we were going to fail if we actually had to play the game."

"But why a kiss?" He pressed. "You were already feeling ill, you could have easily given morning sickness as an excuse. No one would have faulted you."

"I don't know." She shrugged, fidgeting nervously.

"Did you like it?" He pressed, his deep voice like velvet cloaked steel.

"What?!" Ella chirped, her gold eyes going wide. "Of course not, it was just for show. Besides, I'm not a good kisser anyway."

Sinclair's brow furrowed. "Why the hell do you think that?" He asked.

"Mike told me, more than once." She admitted, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

Sinclair rose from his seat, having heard more than enough. He migrated over to where Ella sat, kneeling down onto the floor of the car so he could look her in the eye. Is he going to touch me? Ella wondered anxiously. Why do I want to feel his hands on me so badly? She got her answer a moment later, when he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, and tilted her face up to his. "Your ex was a fucking idiot." He murmurs. "For more reason than one."

Her heart sank, it hadn't escaped her notice how many people had commented on her beauty that evening, or how proud Sinclair had seemed to have her on his arm.

"Because I'm pretty?"

Sinclair shook his head. "You're gorgeous, Ella, but so are lots of people. He's an idiot because he couldn't see past it – to the force of nature underneath."

"I'm not a force of nature." Ella protest. "I'm poor and weak and –"

His finger moves to cover my lips. "You are what I say you are." Ella bristled beneath his intimate touch and domineering manner.

She wanted to challenge him, to insist that she knew herself better than he did. With great effort, she kept her mouth shut because she knew it wasn't an argument she could win. Nodding in approval, Sinclair continued. "And I say you are brave, clever, so sweet I can't stand it, and so much stronger than you know." He offered her a wolfish grin then, "Not not mention the best kisser I've ever had the pleasure of tasting."

Ella blushed scarlet, and Sinclair chuckled, taking the seat next to her. He slung an arm over her shoulders, encouraging her to lean into his warmth. "Thank you." Ella murmured, sinking into his embrace.

"I didn't say it to please you." Sinclair remarked simply, brushing off her thanks. "I said it because it's true."

"Bossy wolf." Ella muttered, earning herself another rumbling laugh.

Before long her eyelids were growing very heavy, and the exhaustion of the stressful evening threatened to take hold completely.

She tried to stay awake until they returned home, but the little voice in her head told her not to be silly. Sinclair would make sure she woke up when the time came.

Sinclair watched as Ella slowly succumbed to sleep, feeling a stab of guilt for putting her through so much when she needed her rest. He couldn't help ducking his head to press a kiss to her hair, thinking again of their kiss. For all her flaws, he'd thought he'd been to heaven and back with Lydia when it came to sex – after all the Goddess fated couples together based on sexually compatibility. She'd been the best lover he'd ever had, but kissing her hadn't felt anything like kissing Ella.

She threw herself into the act so freely, without any inhibitions or reluctance. Ella was clearly an incredibly affectionate woman, and it made him even angrier to imagine the world denying her the love she deserved for so many years. He couldn't wait until Mike was finally in front of him. He'd teach that feckless human a lesson he'd never forget.

Sinclair breathed in the fragile human's scent, calming his temper with Ella's bewitching fragrance. His wolf purred with approval, his voice rising in the back of Sinclair's head. She smells better and better every day. This one is special.

It's probably just the baby. Sinclair reasoned, knowing exactly what his wolf was talking about. The more time that passed, the more Ella smelled like a she-wolf. Frankly it had been driving him crazy – pushing him to scent mark her far more frequently and intimately than was necessary, toying with his senses at every turn. He wasn't even sure how to describe her aroma – one moment it was like fresh rain and wild orchids, the next like sultry summer nights and sweet honey.

Completely different from the pup. His wolf pointed out. You know it's not the same scent.

That's true, but there's no other reason her scent would be changing. You forget this has never happened before, we don't know what happens to humans carrying shifter pups. I'm sure it's just the baby.

Sinclair's wolf rolled his eyes. Fine, stick your head in the sand if you're so determined. The Alpha wasn't sure what to make of this – of any of this. Why was his wolf being so difficult, arguing and being contrary just to be contrary. This had never happened before. His wolf had been with him from birth, and they'd never butted heads this way.

What on earth did it mean? And why was Ella the one to bring out this side of his inner animal? Was his wolf right? Was there something special about her? Or was it just the fact that she was carrying his baby, making his dreams come true when no one else had been able to do so? Did that alone make her special? Sinclair was not a man who was used to feeling uncertain, and he didn't like it one bit. At the same time, he couldn't bring himself to blame Ella for making him feel this way, even though she was certainly the cause.

Instead he found himself watching her sleep the rest of the ride home, completely transfixed, and perfectly content to watch her do nothing at all.

Chapter 20 – Shower

Ella

I dream that I'm on a boat, rocking gently in a starlit sea. I stare up at the night sky, bathed in the light of the full moon. My belly is swollen with my pup, and Sinclair is beside me, telling me stories about shifters – all the myths and legends of his people. His voice carries me along the waves, until he begins describing the life we'll have together with our baby. He paints a picture of perfection, a happy life as a family of three- my child and I pampered and cared for while he rules his empire, wanting for nothing.

It all seems too good to be true, and it's not until I realize I'm dreaming that I understand why. When I blink my eyes open, I realize that there are tears in them. I really am rocking, but not in any boat. Sinclair is carrying me inside from the car and clearly trying very hard not to wake me.

I must have fallen asleep. I realize dazedly.

"You don't have to carry me." I murmur, hoping the emotion in my voice can be passed off as grogginess.

"Hush now." He croons, "I don't mind. You just rest."

Another time I might argue, but I'm so sleepy, and his arms feel so good around me that I just snuggle in. To my surprise, Sinclair leans his face towards my hair and inhales a deep breath. "You smell more like a wolf every day." He shares. "The baby must be very healthy."

This idea makes me smile, "Will I be able to feel it move soon,

if pregnancy is so much shorter?"

"After a couple of months, yes." He confirms.

This is still sooner than human babies quicken, but I feel so impatient. "Hmph, that's so long to wait."

Sinclair chuckles. "Maybe, but it will be so worth the wait, sweet Ella."

"Do... do shifter pregnancies ever have complications?" I ask, finally feeling brave enough to voice this hidden worry. It's been on my mind ever since the doctor told me the baby was developing slowly, but Sinclair seemed so confident that I told myself everything was fine.

“Rarely.” He answers. “But it happens. That’s why I’m being so cautious with you – I don’t want anything to happen, for both our sakes.”

I scoff, pressing my nose to his chest and inhaling his own scent. “I think you just like telling people what to do – baby or not.”

Sinclair’s wolf flashes in his eyes, but he smirks; “Keep it up you naughty thing, and I’ll show you what strict really is.” Before I can respond or contemplate what this might mean, he pushes into my bedroom, striding towards my bed as if he intends to tuck me in.

“No, I want a shower first.” I object.

“Are you sure? It’s very late.” Sinclair asks.

I nod, “I hate going to bed not feeling clean.” After a childhood of almost always feeling dirty, it had become a crutch of mine.

Sinclair helps me with the zipper on my dress, and within minutes I’m standing beneath a steaming cascade of water, feeling more and more myself as more of the day washes away. I felt like a different person with all that makeup and finery on, it’s such a relief to be free of it.

I’m rinsing shampoo from my hair when I hear a strange growl – violent and very close by. It isn’t Sinclair, and it isn’t coming through the me*tal link with the baby. I don’t know how I can recognize his growl from anyone else’s, but in my heart, I know that danger is near. Did someone come into the bathroom after me? I wonder frantically, trying to peer through the fogged up glass, how did they get past Sinclair’s guards!?

The snarl sounds again, reverberating around the small space, and I cry out in fear, unable to stay quiet. I don’t think ten seconds passed before the door slams open and Sinclair appears, his wolf glowing in his eyes. “Ella, are you alright? What’s wrong?”

He comes over to the shower stall, opening the glass door to release the steam, and finds me curled up in a ball in the corner. “I swear someone was in here with me.” I confess shakily. “I could hear them growling and snarling, but I couldn’t see through the steam.”

Sinclair’s body, already rigid, tightens even further as he begins scenting the air and searching the room. “I don’t smell anything” He tells me after a moment, “but I’ll have the guards search anyway, just in case” He charges out of the room only long enough to bark some orders at his guards, telling them to begin searching the grounds. While he’s away, I wrap a towel around my naked body, trying to ease my trembling.

As soon as Sinclair returns, he pulls me into his arms. "It's okay Ella, you're safe." He promises.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me." I apologize.

"It's okay, it's probably just all the stress piling up on you." He reasons. "But if you don't feel safe you can sleep in my room tonight."

I nod into his chest, realizing it's bare for the first time. He must have been getting ready for bed himself.

My nerves are so frayed that I don't even object when he swings my legs up into his arms, or think about stopping to grab night clothes, I simply let Sinclair carry me back to his rooms. When he sets me down I realize I didn't bring anything to sleep in. I pause, trying to decide if I want to go back or ask to borrow something, when Sinclair's voice interrupts my thoughts. "Oh no!"

"What, what's wrong?" I ask anxiously, spinning around and searching for a threat.

However Sinclair's attention is focused on me, and suddenly I'm painfully aware of the fact I'm only wearing a towel.

"You washed off my scent." He frowns, prowling closer.

"So?" I murmur, "I'm only going to sleep. No one is going to be smelling me."

He shakes his head. "We can't take that risk."

"I – what risk?" I murmur, feeling my blood heat up in response.

"Well if I have to wake up early and leave for the office, there won't be time to mark you before I go." Sinclair reasons. "I'm afraid my wolf is fairly insistent. It needs to be tonight."

"Your wolf?" I squeak.

Sinclair nods, "It's for the baby's protection, he won't let either of us rest until it's done."

He's towering me over now, and I can already feel my body getting worked up. The last couple of times he's marked me have been almost dangerously arousing. "But I'm naked." I whisper, as if it's some sort of secret.

His green eyes flash, and a shiver runs down my spine. “Do you want me to go get you some underthings?”

I gnaw on my lower lip. I don't want him to leave, and the idea of being completely naked with this man is beyond intriguing. Besides, I know it doesn't mean anything to him. Nudity to shifters is completely normal, and he might think I'm pretty or a good kisser, but at the end of the day I'm still a human. He could never want me that way.

I shake my head after a moment, hoping I won't completely embarrass myself. Sinclair nods with approval, reaching for my towel. I instinctively clutch the fabric to my skin, backing out of his reach. He arches a brow, “Second thoughts?”

“No.” I respond defiantly, unwrapping the terrycloth and revealing myself to him completely.

His dark gaze rakes over every inch of my exposed skin, and before long I have goosebumps. Sinclair strips off his own clothes, and it takes all my willpower not to look below his

waist. He backs me into the bed, and when my thighs hit the mattress I clamber up onto it, still inching out of his reach, but too afraid to turn my back on such a known predator. I know he would never hurt me, but right now his wolf is in control, and I feel his power deep in my bones.

I'm shifting backwards towards the pillows, and suddenly Sinclair is on the bed with me. He's on all fours, stalking me with lethal grace until I'm pinned beneath him, feeling more vulnerable than I have in my entire life. A low purr sounds in his chest as his green eyes bore into mine, and somehow I feel soothed, even as he lowers his face to the curve of my neck and breathes me in. His chest is brushing mine, and I'm embarrassed to realize my nipples are already hard.

“Are you cold?” He rumbles in my ear.

I nod, not feeling brave enough to admit how turned on I am.

“Mmm, let's see if we can do something about that.” He offers, pressing his limbs flush to mine. The next thing I know his body is undulating against mine as his hands stroke every inch of me. This is like the previous times he marked me, only even more intimate than before. We've never done this naked, and until now, he's always been in total control, now I can feel his hardness pressing into my thigh, and I have to tell myself over and over again that it's just a natural response – just the pooling wetness between my legs is perfectly normal – considering a gorgeous man is currently rubbing himself all over me.

It takes longer this time, though I don't know why. It seems like Sinclair is determined to be even more thorough than in the past. I'm proud that I'm able to get through it without making a fool of myself, and though I wish it could go on

forever, I'm also relieved when Sinclair finally stops, settling with his ear pressed to my belly, just above our pup. He looks so serene listening to the tiny heart beat, and who knows whatever else is coming through the me*tal link. I actually thought he'd fallen asleep, until of course he opens his eyes and catches me staring. "There's someone I want to take you to meet tomorrow."

Chapter 21 – Sinclair Confides in his father

Sinclair

I think my wolf is broken. Legitimately. I can't figure out what on earth is going on with him. Last night the threat against Ella made my heart practically leap out of my chest, but that's to be expected. What was not to be expected was how upset my wolf became when he realized that Ella had washed my scent off. Despite what I told her, it had nothing to do with protecting our cover, and everything to do with him throwing a tantrum that she was no longer scent marked.

Being naked with her was both a blessing and a curse. I could happily admire her beautiful body all day long, but the intimate physical contact got me more than a little excited. My balls were so blue by the time my wolf was satisfied that the only way I could calm down was by listening to the baby's heartbeat. It was an important reminder to be gentle with Ella, and gave me more joy than I can express.

My mental link with the pup is a fleeting thing, and most of the time all I can hear are blips of emotion. The baby is happy when it hears Ella's voice or smells me, it likes it best when we're together, and more often than not it simply sleeps. Still, merely being near it has given me new appreciation for my own father. I never knew it was possible to love someone I've yet to even meet so much, and the power of the bond astonishes me. Moreover, I want Dad to meet Ella – he's had a rough few years, and I can't think of anything that would make him happier than meeting the woman carrying his first grandchild.

Ella looks nervous as the car moves along through the heavy mid-day traffic. I haven't told her who I'm taking her to meet yet and I'm getting the impression she doesn't like surprises. She's a fascinating puzzle, this little human. Clearly accustomed to great hardship and yet obviously used to getting her own way. I suppose after such a turbulent life, control is a crutch for her, so much so that she panics when it slips out of her fingers. Is it terrible that I enjoy throwing her off balance so much, knowing what I do about her past? She's just so cute when she gets all riled up – I can't help myself.

When the car finally pulls to a stop, Ella blinks up at me hopefully. "Will you tell me now?"

"Come on, trouble." I chuckle, sliding out of the car and extending my hand to help her do the same, "You'll find out soon enough."

Ella grumbles mutinously under her breath as she sets off down the street, and I catch her waist, pulling her under my arm. "Would you like to say that a bit louder?" I intone ominously.

"No." She responds tartly. "I would not."

“You know I have supernatural hearing, right?” I question, watching her eyes widen anxiously.

She processes this for a moment, then narrows her eyes suspiciously. “Could you really hear me?”

“Not this time.” I admit, “you did a good job mumbling.”

“Then I’ll do a good job in the future too.” Ella decides, nodding in approval of her decision.

I’m reluctant to laugh and encourage her defiance, but I can’t stop the corners of my mouth from quirking up. I steer her into the house, pushing through the heavy door without pausing to knock. As we stride inside the familiar space, I’m transported back to my childhood, remembering walking these same halls as a young boy. It’s not as luxurious as my current estate, but it’s undeniably the place I consider home.

“Whose house is this?” Ella asked, surveying the comfortable rooms curiously.

“Actually, this is the house where I grew up.” I finally share, nodding towards the photos on the wall.

Ella is so preoccupied studying the images that she doesn’t seem to notice my father wheeling into the hall, seated comfortably but permanently in a high-tech wheelchair. Either Ella really is interested in the images before her, or human hearing is even worse than I realize, because she doesn’t turn around until I speak.

“Dad this is Ella.” I nudge her forward so they can meet, “Ella, this is my father.”

Ella blinks, seeming unable to find the words to reply. This was clearly the last thing she expected. My father was once a terrifying man – every bit as tall and imposing as I am myself. Now however, he’s a shadow of the man he used to be. He was paralyzed from the waist down more than five years ago now, and even though the injury stole his title, vitality and mobility, he’s never let it dampen his spirit. In intelligence and will he’s as strong as he’s always been, and I still learn from him every time we talk.

“I hoped he would bring you to meet me soon.” Dad tells Ella. “I’m so thrilled that you found each other. I’ve been waiting for a grandchild for some time now.”

“It’s an honor to meet you.” Ella replies, “I’m happy too, I think we’ve all been waiting.”

“You can say that again.” I chime in.

“Please, come in, I want to hear everything about my new daughter-in-law.” Dad encourages, wheeling into the living room. Ella, however, is frozen in place. At first I thought his allusion to our fake union might have blindsided her, but the more I watch, the more I suspect she’s more daunted by the prospect of sharing her story with him. Even though I know all the major moments in her life from my investigators, I realize Ella has never spoken about them herself. The more I think about it, the more I appreciate how little she speaks about her past at all.

I’m almost disappointed in my own powers of observation. She’s so charming and affectionate it’s easy to mistake her genial qualities for openness – but she isn’t open, not really.

Ella actually sighs with relief when her phone begins to ring, though she looks up to me for permission before actually answering it. “It’s okay, go ahead.” I permit, “I need to have a word with my Dad anyway.”

She nods appreciatively and raises the device to her ear, “Cora?”

I can hear the other woman’s voice on the other end of the line, and stride after my father to avoid eavesdropping. I really did want to introduce Ella to Dad – to connect these new members of my family with the man who raised me – but I also need to speak to my father after what happened last night.

“Ella’s taking a call from her sister.” I explain when I enter the room alone, taking a seat across from him. “And as eager as I am to catch up with you, I need to speak about something and I don’t want her to overhear.”

My father was Alpha for almost 20 years before the attack, and he understands the need for discretion and secrecy better than anyone. No one understands the drive to protect your loved ones from unseen threats better than a pack leader. “Go ahead.”

“We went to a campaign event last night at the King’s palace – it was Ella’s public debut.” I recount, “But when we came home there was a strange wolf in her room. They were gone by the time I reached her and I said it was just her imagination, but I’m afraid whoever was there wanted to hurt her.”

“She has no idea?” My father clarifies.

“I didn’t want to frighten her more than she already was. The baby is still so little – she doesn’t need the stress.” I share, even as a stab of guilt assails me. “Do you think the King or the Prince might have been behind it?”

“You know as well as I do that the King will go to any lengths necessary to hold onto his power.” My father rumbles, nodding to his mangled legs.

We've never been able to prove it, but the timing of my father's injury was always beyond suspicious. Rogues beset him after an event during his own campaign to be king five years ago, after the last king died without ever producing an heir. His primary competitor became king, and probably expected to rule for far longer than he actually has. I consider it karma, if you have to sabotage your competition to seize power, it shouldn't be any surprise when the alpha council loses faith in you afterwards.

"The King and Prince never paid any attention to me before though," I remind him, "do you think my perceived sterility really kept them at bay? Is having a pup on the way really all it took for them to finally see me as a threat?"

"You know the history as well as I do," My father murmurs, "They never believed the Alpha council would elect another ruler without heirs, even if you were the most qualified candidate for the job. Ella changes everything. Your pup changes everything."

"Then why not attack me?" I growl, hating the idea that finally getting a family of my own could also bring about the end of my career. "Why target Ella?"

My father rolls his eyes then. "Come on, Dominic. Whether they admit it or not, you're the strongest Alpha to enter the field of competition in half a century – stronger even than me." He concedes with a smile. "Going after you would be suicidal – but a breeding she-wolf? She's the perfect target." He shakes his head. "And if you don't have heirs, you might as well give up the throne now."

"That isn't fair." I snarl. "Ella is innocent in all this – and the pup..." I trail off, unable to comprehend the idea of anyone hurting an unborn child.

"I know." My father sighs, "But this cannot be ignored. If we're right, Ella and the pup are in grave danger."

Chapter 22 – Ella’s Nightmares

Ella

“Wait, what!” I exclaim, not believing my own ears. “You got your job back?”

“It sounds like somebody very important called in some favors for me.” My sister confirms. “They even gave me a raise to compensate for my troubles.”

She doesn’t need to say more. There’s only one person with enough power to undo a command issued by Dominic Sinclair – and that’s Dominic Sinclair himself. “I can’t believe this. Why didn’t he tell me?”

“You mean you didn’t ask?” I can imagine the precise look on Cora’s face. Stunned and reeling at once.

“I mean, not after that first time.” I relate, wondering if I should have tried harder to help her. Did I misperceive my importance to Sinclair, or the power I hold now that I’m carrying his child?

“Well apparently that’s all it took.” She relates, her voice full of elation. “Thank you, Ella.”

“Don’t thank me,” I object. “I’m the one who got us into this situation to begin with.” I remind her ruefully.

“Of course you didn’t.” She refutes. “Listen, I don’t know how it happened, but either I made a mistake or...”

“Or what?” I press.

“Or someone did this on purpose.” She sounds uncertain now, as if she can’t fathom the motive for such an act. I find myself equally confused.

“Why would they?” I fret, not wanting to believe my sister messed up so badly, but not seeing any logic in the alternative.

“I don’t know.” She confesses. “But that’s not important now. It’s all going to be okay from here on out. You get your baby, I get my career... the only thing we need now is to find a way to get revenge on Mike.”

“That was a much easier problem to solve before he fled halfway across the country.” I share. “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to enact any sort of plan against him when he’s so far away.”

“You could always ask for Sinclair’s help.” Cora suggests, a note of teasing in her voice

– the same one children use on the playground to tease each other about crushes.

“No.” I don’t even need to think about it. “I don’t want him to think I’m high maintenance. He’s already helped me so much.” Glancing at the closed door Sinclair disappeared behind, I sidle back towards the entrance, lowering my voice to a whisper. “If I start to seem like too much trouble he might change his mind about letting me have visitation rights with the baby. It’s honestly driving me crazy – I’ve got to censor every single word that comes out of my mouth.”

“It’s not as if you were an open book before, Elle.” Cora replies wryly.

“No, this is different.” I clarify. “I’m constantly afraid that I’ll say the wrong thing and make myself seem weak or fragile, too annoying to put up with. It’s exhausting.” I drag my hand through my hair. “I end up over-analyzing everything I do with him. I shouldn’t have cried, I was too sassy, too timid, too bold. It’s like walking an emotional tightrope. And the worst part is that he can read me so damned well that even when I try to hide what I’m feeling, he still works it out.”

“I’m sorry sweetie.” Cora commiserates.

“Thanks,” I sigh, “I think I just need a little more time to get my bearings. Once I figure Sinclair out I’ll understand what I need to do to keep my head above water.”

There’s a pregnant pause on the other end of the line.

“What?” I prompt my sister, knowing she wants to say something.

“It’s just that I worry when I hear you talk that way.” Cora admits. “It’s like you’re still in survival mode – ‘keeping your head above water,’ rather than taking care of yourself, making yourself happy and enjoying becoming a mother.”

“Yeah well, like it or not, this is a survival situation.” I counter cynically, “if I don’t perform well I lose my baby. The best I can hope for if I do perfectly is visitation rights after Sinclair finds his mate, and even that could mean anything from every weekend to once a year. I don’t want to risk landing with the latter or bungling the deal completely.”

Cora sighs heavily, and lets the matter drop. “How are you otherwise? Any morning sickness?” She asks, excitement entering her tone.

I laugh. “I spent all morning in the bathroom... but I’ve never been happier to be sick.”

“Aw, I’ve never been happier for you to feel miserable either.” She jokes. “I hope it keeps up.”

“Me too.” The more the baby makes its presence known, the more secure I feel that it’s growing big and strong.

“Anyway, I’ve gotta run. Sinclair brought me to meet his father.” I confess. “It was great to talk though, let’s have dinner soon.”

Lunch with Sinclair’s father was surprisingly pleasant. I don’t know what I imagined when I pictured the elder Alpha, but the sweet man in the wheelchair was far from the imposing figure I expected. He radiated quiet strength and dignity, but he also welcomed me to his family with genuine warmth. I could see the shadow of a powerful leader in his stoic demeanor, but also the humility of a man whose circumstances had irrevocably changed and who chose to adapt rather than rail at the world for its injustice. He was obviously incredibly proud of his son, and obviously thrilled to become a grandfather.

I felt far more at ease when we finally left his home, and I spent the rest of the day napping and reading my pregnancy books. I can’t believe how tired I’ve been, or how hungry. I expected the changes, I just didn’t think they’d happen so fast. Of course after so much rest, I couldn’t sleep when night finally fell. It took me ages to finally drift off, and when I finally found rest – nightmares awaited me.

I found myself trapped in the horrors of my past: reliving the orphanage and the foster homes, all full of cruel adults and abusive parents. In my dreams I’m always running away from someone, trying to protect Cora and my other surrogate siblings. The dreams have gotten worse since I got pregnant, no doubt driven by my raging hormones.

Tonight takes me back to one of the worst days of my life. The sounds of my own screams and pleading tears fill my head, as dreadful images fill my vision. The next thing I know someone is shouting my name, and my eyes snap open.

“Ella!” Sinclair is sitting beside me on my bed, his powerful hands gripping my shoulders as he tries to bring me back to reality. It takes me a minute to realize it’s him, rather than the man who’d been attacking me in my dreams. I jerk out of his hold and scramble to the other side of the mattress, curling up into a little ball and gasping for air.

“Easy sweetheart, it’s only me.” Sinclair assures me, making a soft purring sound that magically unwinds my taut muscles. How does he do that?

There are tears streaming down my face, and again I feel a stab of shame for showing this weakness in front of him. “I’m okay.” I stammer once I come back to myself. “I’m okay.”

Sinclair shushes me softly, and though I thought I was out of his reach, I clearly

underestimated the length of his strong arms. He plucks me from the corner and pulls me into his lap. "You don't have to be okay, Ella." He remarks gently, cuddling me close. "You're safe."

Those words are like a balm on my soul, but I know where they lead. If I let him comfort me, he's going to want to know what happened. And I don't want to talk about my dreams, I don't want him to feel like I'm some fragile creature he has to soothe. I scramble for something to pull his attention away from me, landing on a question that has been burning in my mind since this afternoon. "Why didn't you tell me about Cora's job?"

Sinclair seems taken aback. "What? Were you dreaming about Cora?"

"No." I sniffle, "I just want to know."

"You want to distract me, more like." Sinclair guesses shrewdly. At first I think this means he won't answer, but then he says. "I didn't tell you because I didn't do it for you. I did it because it was right."

Why does my heart sink when he says it wasn't for me? Did I want it to be? Would it be better if he only took action to please me, rather than doing so for the sake of morality? No, of course not... so why does it sting so badly?

"Oh." I murmur, unable to conjure any more eloquent response.

"Does that disappoint you?" He asks, sounding curious, rather than judgemental.

"No, I just didn't expect it." I admit.

"Because I'm the big bad wolf?" Sinclair teases, petting me in long, tender caresses.

I nod, pressing my nose to his chest. "I keep waiting for you to huff and puff, and blow my house down." I joke through my tears.

Sinclair chuckles, and for one long moment he simply holds me, rocking me back and forth until my racing heartbeat slows. "I ought to make you tell me about your dreams." He muses, making my limbs stiffen up again. "But I won't." His lips graze my hair, and butterflies burst to life in my tummy. "That said, I think you should sleep with me from now on."

Chapter 23 – Ella’s First Interview

Ella

I must have misheard him. He can’t truly mean that he wants me to move into his rooms. Does he really think I’m that much of a baby, that I need constant watching?

“But it was only one dream.” I protest, my voice still shaky, “I swear it’s not a big deal.”

Sinclair purrs again, and I feel my insides melting against my will. “Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. I just want you to sleep easily.” Before I can stop him, he’s lifting me into my arms.

“Sinclair—” He interrupts me with a growl, and I quickly amend myself, “Dominic this really isn’t necessary. I can sleep on my own.”

“I’m sure you can.” He concedes. “But I want you close.”

“And what about what I want?” The words slip out before I can stop them, and Sinclair pauses, looking down at me with an appraising look.

“And what do you want, Ella?” He asks huskily, his deep voice reverberating down my spine.

“I—” I open my mouth to tell him I want to be alone, in my own space and without his intimidating presence. However somehow I can’t make the words come. Why is it that I can’t seem to stop myself from speaking when I don’t want to, then can’t make myself talk when I do? What is this man doing to me?

Sinclair smirks. “You know the problem, don’t you?” He taunts, and I can only shake my head in reply. “You can’t lie to me. The pup is making you more and more like a wolf, and wolves can’t lie to their Alpha’s, not directly at least.”

The breath seems to evaporate from my lungs, I can’t lie to him? My eyes go wide as I realize the implications of this, and I want to protest that such a thing isn’t fair, people are entitled to their secrets! “But you’re not my Alpha.” I finally protest, my voice sounding very small indeed.

Sinclair cocks a brow. “Aren’t I?” After a beat he continues towards the door, as if this settles the matter. I don’t know why I don’t object further – maybe because he’s clearly made up his mind, maybe because I don’t really want him to change it. I let him carry me out into the hall, flushing scarlet when I see so many guards waiting outside my room. Had all these men heard me screaming like a baby? Surely I hadn’t spoken or said anything while unconscious?

“Do you always have this many guards posted at night?” I squeak.

“This pup is the most important thing to me in the world.” Sinclair responds simply. “You can expect lots of guards to be around from now on.”

Of course. I think, It's all for the pup. I'm just an afterthought. Will I ever be anything more?

I don't need to ask Sinclair to know the answer – it's already painfully obvious: No. In a world of mystically powerful beings like wolves, a human like me could never be anything but an afterthought. The only reason he's putting up with me at all is the pregnancy. And honestly, the only reason I'm putting up with him is our arrangement... so why does it hurt so much?

The next morning I wake up to find a maid setting down a room service tray by my bedside, stacked high with my favorite foods. At first the smell of fruit and oatmeal has my stomach growling, but before I can so much as raise a spoon to my lips, a wave of nausea overtakes me. I rush to the bathroom and retch, groaning pitifully.

When I finally finish with the joys of pregnancy, I return to Sinclair's sprawling, king sized bed. The food which looked so appetizing a moment ago just makes my stomach churn now, but I notice a folded note on the tray. My name is scrawled across the front in the swooping handwriting I now recognize as Sinclair's.

Ella,

I've arranged an interview for you this morning, with the leading news outlets in the area. We've been getting a lot of requests and the reporter promised you would only have to answer questions of which I approved. Call me if you have any questions. I'll see you tonight.

Yours,

Dominic

An interview?! I've never given an interview in my life! And this won't even be an interview as myself, this will be an interview under cover, pretending to be a completely different person, a completely different species! What kind of questions are they going to ask, what on earth am I going to say to them? What am I going to wear?

Two hours later, I'm seated in front of an intimidating man in a sharp looking suit, feeling very small and out of place. A camera is poised on my face, and I'm trying to look serene – rather than panicked. I found a pretty sweater dress in the wardrobe Sinclair procured

for me, and decided that simple elegance was the best foot forward. Now I wonder if I miscalculated, the reporter is watching me with sharp eyes, and I can already feel myself blushing.

“So Ella, it will come as no surprise to you that many shifters in the Moon Valley Pack and beyond are very curious about you.” He begins obliquely. “With you by his side, the Alpha is poised to become our next King, yet no one knows anything about you.”

“I can understand how that might worry some pack members.” I smile gently, trying to appear confident and self-assured.

“How did you and Dominic meet?” He presses. “When did it happen, I’d love to hear the whole story?”

Sinclair and I had discussed this at length, even before this interview arose. “Well it will be obvious to all those in the know that we aren’t fated, but I can’t help thinking that the Goddess didn’t play a hand in our meeting. For years my family in the Shadow Pack insisted we had no other relations – apparently my parents cut ties with the Moon Valley before I was even born. It wasn’t until they passed away that I learned about my cousins here – including Aileen Corentin.”

We’d decided the story should be as close to the truth as possible, so my fake identity is an orphan just like I am in reality. “I came to visit her after making contact, and of course she’s the wife of Beta Hugo. One day I was having lunch with Aileen and Hugo and Dominic walked in... and the rest is history.”

“But you haven’t known each other very long, is that correct?” The reporter inquires.

“Yes,” I confirm. “But when it’s true love, it doesn’t take long for the heart to recognize its mate. And then we were blessed with a pup without even trying.”

“Some pack members might be worried that you come from such a humble background, you have no experience leading.” The reporter states bluntly. “How would you respond to their fears?”

This was a question Sinclair hadn’t prepared me for in our earlier discussions regarding our cover. We decided on what we would tell people about how we met, nothing more. “I would say that great leaders come from all kinds of backgrounds, and in fact my humble origins give me insight into the needs of everyday shifters in a way that an aristocratic upbringing would not. I’m in touch with what regular people want and need, and I can speak for them with empathy and understanding, representing their voices in a forum where they often left out.”

The reporter arches his brows, and I know I’ve impressed him. Take that! I think

triumphantly. People always assume I don't have a brain in my head because I'm young and attractive, not to mention I chose to work caring for children. But I'm no fool, and hopefully this will help the shifters see that.

"And what do you think our society needs most at this time in history, what is the biggest issue the future King and Queen need to address?" He asks.

I navigate his questions with more or less difficulty for the next half hour, feeling better about some responses than others, and praying that I haven't put my foot in my mouth. I think I've done well, but I'm completely exhausted. At first part of me was excited to pretend to be someone other than myself – almost like playing dress up or make believe. However that initial interest disappeared very quickly, when I realized just how stressful it is to constantly be acting.

I know what it's like to put up walls around myself, but this is the first time I've ever been forced to blatantly lie to those around me, to try to pass myself off as someone else. All at once, the gravity of this deal I've struck slams into me. If I'm exhausted now, how am I going to feel when I've been doing this for months? Years? Can I really do this for the rest of my life? What will happen if the truth comes out? What will people do when they learn I'm a fraud?

Because, I realize, that's what I am. This isn't just a game or a play we're performing, I'm actively deceiving people. I'm campaigning to take up a public office, and lying every step of the way. Guilt and worry assails me in a tidal wave, this is wrong! I think frantically. I have to talk to Sinclair.

Chapter 24 – Cold Feet

Sinclair

I'm sitting in my office, speaking with my cabinet, when Ella's delicious scent fills my nose. I've been thinking about her on and off all morning, wondering how she took the news of the interview, and hating that I hadn't been able to tell her about it in person. Normally I wouldn't do such a thing, but I'd needed to check in with my guards about their investigation into the intruder, and she'd been sleeping so sweetly that I couldn't bear to wake her.

I can sense how close she is now, and wonder if something went wrong. I'm already on my feet when I hear my assistant encouraging her to stay, "No, he'll want to see you, just wait one moment."

"I'm sorry, it's really not urgent," Ella is protesting. "I should have known he'd be busy."

She's retreating, her delicate footsteps receding, and I push through the door before she can get away. "And just where do you think you're going?"

Ella freezes in place, her little body winding tight as a spring. When she turns, she's staring at the floor, "I'm sorry." She says again, "I didn't mean to interrupt."

I glance at the wolves over my shoulder, "Leave us."

Ella gnaws on her plump lower lip as my cabinet members file past her out of the office, shifting restlessly on her feet. I can tell something is bothering her, but I also can't help but think how lovely she looks in the cream-colored dress hugging her curves. "Come here, little one." I command, not moving from the doorway.

This gets her attention, and indignation flashes in her golden eyes as her gaze snaps to mine. I can tell she wants to disobey, but I arch my brow in challenge and she slowly crosses the distance between us. I drag my knuckles over the high plane of her cheekbone when she's finally in front of me, enjoying the way her defiance becomes muddled with uncertainty once more. "How did the interview go?"

"Good – I think." She qualifies, unconsciously leaning her cheek into my hand. My wolf perks up at her obvious response to my touch, and I beckon her inside.

"Can I get you anything, have you eaten lunch?" I question, thinking of the pup.

"My stomach has been too unsettled." Ella admits, looking guilty.

I press my hand to her flat belly, feeling the pup's heartbeat and prodding the mental link. The babe seems perfectly content, but it worries me that Ella hasn't eaten. "We can

order in some lunch.” I suggest, resisting the urge to continue touching her.

“Sin–Dominic, I need to talk to you.” She answers, ignoring the offer and just barely remembering to call me by my given name.

“Sure, what’s going on?” I inquire, taking a seat behind my desk.

Ella’s hands are fidgeting, and she’s staring at the anxious movement rather than meeting my gaze. “I think... I think I’m having second thoughts.”

This gets my attention loud and clear. “How so?”

“What we’re doing... it’s wrong.” Ella chokes out, positively trembling. “It’s fraud. I... I don’t know if I can take the pressure.” Her cheeks are flushing with color and she sounds as though she might cry. “I know I said I could do it, but I’m not sure I can pretend to be someone I’m not for the rest of my life... but I don’t want to lose the baby.” Now she really is crying, and I’m on my feet in an instant. Ella turns her back on me, shoulders shaking, as if she doesn’t want me to see how upset she is. “I don’t want to fail you, I can’t lose the baby. I just don’t know what to do.”

I approach behind her, my heart aching for the poor little human. I should have foreseen this problem. Ella is honest and good-hearted, of course a life of deceit would bother her. I suppose when we made the agreement I didn’t realize how much integrity she has, but I know now. Ella flinches when I take her shoulders in my hands, and I have to forcibly turn her body to face me again. “Come here,” I say again, but this time it’s not an order. It’s an invitation, one I have to force Ella to accept by pulling her into my arms.

As soon as I envelop her in my embrace, she cracks, emitting a heartbroken sob and wrapping her slender arms around my middle. She must be clinging to me with all her might, but it feels about as powerful as a child’s grip compared to my shifter strength. “I’m sorry.” I profess, kissing her hair. “I should have realized how much this scheme was asking of you.”

“I can still do it!” She insists defiantly, clearly beside herself with the competing needs to prove herself, keep her baby, and do the right thing.

Doubts swirl in my own mind. Can this really work? What will we do after the baby comes, and she no longer has its smell? What happens if someone connects her to Ella Reina, orphaned human and disgraced nanny? Am I really willing to put her through all this? She doesn’t even know about the true dangers she faces, and already the stress is becoming too much. Is asking her to pose as my Luna hurting the pup? What will it think when it gets old enough to understand our relationship is a sham? What would happen if the pack found out the truth?

Even as all the potential calamities fill my head, my wolf surges to the forefront, insisting that we have to find a way to make it work. Ella has already proven to be my biggest asset in this campaign – not only is she giving me an heir, but she charms everyone she meets. I need her if I'm going to win. More importantly, my wolf won't abide the thought of letting her go. I try to tell him dissolving our agreement doesn't mean letting her go, but he's absolutely determined.

"Come on, let's talk about this." I suggest. Moving to the couch. "What worries you the most about our plan?"

"I don't want to hurt anyone." Ella whispers, tears clinging to her dark lashes. "I don't want to trick honest, hardworking shifters. I don't want my life to be a lie."

"How long have you been feeling this way?" I press.

"I guess a little bit from the beginning." She confesses, "but it really hit me today during the interview. I just thought about doing this for the rest of my life and it just felt so overwhelming."

I nod, pulling her between my legs and petting her sides. "The first, and most important thing I need you to understand is that shifter society doesn't work like human society does. We are a ruthless species, and we do whatever is necessary to ensure the safety of our packs." I explain. "I know it feels like a giant fraud, but you have to remember that my campaign is the only thing standing between a lot of innocent people and a tyrant. If the Prince takes the throne, he will wipe out the Alpha council and all his political competition in order to stay in power forever. He will oppress and terrorize millions of people."

"If he's that bad, why hasn't he already staged a coup?" Ella inquires, a few notable degrees calmer as my words sink in.

"Because he doesn't have the power yet." I clarify, "He doesn't have an army – yet. His father is bad, but he's old fashioned enough to respect our political system. The Prince on the other hand..." I trail off.

"So basically you're saying that lying is the lesser evil." Ella summarizes.

"Honesty is an incredibly admirable trait." I relate gently, "but it's also a luxury that shifters can't afford right now. I know it feels wrong, but when your enemies are as abominable as the Prince, you have to bend the rules to survive."

"Like wartime spies?" Ella suggests morosely.

"A little." I crack a smile.

She nods, thinking so deeply that her brow furrows, and I have to resist the urge to smooth out the adorable wrinkles with my fingers. "I want a safe life for my baby. If the Prince wins the election... would he...?" She trails off, unable to utter the horrible words.

"It's highly likely" I confirm, I have no doubt the prince would try to kill my heir – he probably has already.

Ella frowns, "Then I'll do whatever it takes to help you win." She seems much more relaxed now, but I can still sense her lingering nerves.

"Would you feel better if you could spend more time with shifters, get to know our ways better?" I ask, suspecting that at least some of her unease is due to the fact that she's afraid she'll fail.

Ella nods, and I give her a squeeze. "Okay, then you and I are going to start going out more, so you can get to know my world and my people."

"I think that would help." Ella admits. "I'm sorry I lost it that way, I don't know if it's the hormones or the stress, or what! I just started spiraling and I couldn't stop."

"Hey," I interrupt, "It's okay. I want you to tell me when you lose it, I want you to talk to me when you have worries or doubts, okay?"

"Okay." She nods, giving me a shy smile.

"Now let's get some food into you, and tonight – we'll go out."

I don't say what I'm thinking, what my wolf so desperately wants to add to that sentence. I know it's too soon, and Ella is still too skittish of me. Still, it feels too exciting to deny. Tonight we're going out together – On our first real date.

Chapter 25 – First Date

Ella

It's not a date, it's not a date, it's not a date. I've been repeating the same thought over and over again. I know Sinclair is only taking me out tonight because I fell to complete pieces this afternoon. I'm still kicking myself, totally ashamed of my weakness and determined to prove myself to him after all. I spent the better part of an hour picking out my dress for tonight, eventually deciding on a little black dress that shows off my figure and makes me feel strong and sexy, nothing like my usual self.

I wrap a heavy winter coat around my body after Sinclair's makeup artists and hairdressers finish making me up, sliding on a pair of strappy stilettos and taking a few deep breaths before heading downstairs. Sinclair is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, his emerald gaze raking up my bare legs and lingering on my coat, as if he's tempted to unwrap it and get a preview of what's underneath. It's amazing how overheated he can make me feel from a single glance – he's already seen me naked, and it's not as if there's any true feeling behind it anyway.

"Ready?" He asks, his deep voice making my heart stop for just a few beats.

I nod shyly, and let him guide me out the door with a hand on the small of my back. However as soon as I take a step outside, I find myself backing into Sinclair's protective shelter. A sea of reporters is gathered just outside the estate's gates, cameras flashing and voices raised in shouts for our attention. It's precisely like the scene which had awaited us outside the King's palace, only this is a random Tuesday evening – at the place I'm gradually beginning to think of as home.

"Dominic?" I squeak.

"It's okay," His lips brush my ear as he tucks me under his arm, "your interview aired this evening, that's all. Early feedback would indicate you're a hit."

"You mean, they're here because of me?" I whisper, praying I can walk gracefully in my heels, and that Sinclair will catch me if I start to fall flat on my face.

"That's right." He grins, waving at the reporters. "If you feel nervous just take a deep breath, and remember it will all be over in a few seconds."

I do as he advises, and sure enough the next thing I know, I'm safely ensconced in the back seat of his limousine. "Do you ever get used to it?" I ask shakily.

"No." Sinclair admits, "but it gets easier."

"So are you going to tell me where we're headed, or is it another surprise?" I guess,

trying not to sound too petulant.

“This time I’ll tell you.” Sinclair conceded, in a tone that sounded as though this was a grave sacrifice. “I think you’ve had a hard enough day already.”

“Thank you.” I note primly, gazing at him expectantly.

The corner of his mouth tilts upwards, “It’s just so tempting.”

“Dominic!” I exclaim in exasperation.

He laughs. “Okay, okay. We’re going to a little French restaurant I know, and afterwards we’ll go dancing at a popular shifter club.”

I find myself practically bursting with curiosity. “Is shifter food very different from human food? Do shifters have their own dance styles?”

Sinclair smiles, and I suddenly wish I’d chosen to sit beside him, rather than across the car. “We eat more red meat than humans – rarer steaks too – but otherwise it’s not so different.” A low rumble, somewhere between a purr and a growl sounds in his chest. “And our dancing can be a bit more.... Sensual, but don’t worry, I’m looking forward to teaching you.”

Oh god. His intense focus and scintillating tone has my body heating up like a bonfire, and I have to squeeze my thighs together to relieve the sudden ache at their center. It’s not a real date, it’s not a real date, it’s not a real date.

To my dismay, the reporters have followed us to the restaurant, and they’re waiting when Sinclair helps me from the car. Their cameras are still flashing when the hostess helps me out of my coat, capturing images through the glass of my slinky black dress and Sinclair’s ravenous expression when he takes in the sight. It speaks volumes that despite their blatant observation, all I could focus on in that moment was Sinclair, and his glowing green eyes.

Before I know it he’s pulled me into his arms and is claiming my mouth in an earth-shattering kiss. I’m sure it’s only for the benefit of the cameras, but I melt against him immediately, letting him ravish me for all to see. My heart is hammering so powerfully when he finally releases me that I almost don’t hear him tell me how incredible I look. I’m in a complete daze as he guides me to the back of the restaurant, trying to recall if I’ve ever felt so overpowered by lust. I’m a grown woman who’s had a healthy sex-life, but I can’t ever recall feeling as though I’ll die if someone doesn’t make love to me in the next five minutes. But that’s exactly how I feel now.

“Ella?” Sinclair’s voice drags me back into the present, and I realize more time has

passed than I realize. We're seated at the table, and a waitress is standing beside him, watching me with an expectant smile. "Something to drink?"

"Just water." I manage huskily, trying to pull myself together.

"You still with me?" Sinclair teases a moment later.

I'm beginning to wonder if werewolf pheromones are extra powerful on humans, the more time I spend with this man, the more I feel like I'm being drugged by desire.

"Mhmm," I murmur, my voice much higher than I intended. "Do you have any recommendations?"

I was talking about the menu, but Sinclair's sultry reply comes back, "I always recommend sitting side by side, rather than across from one another."

"I don't know." I answer coyly, "It's awfully warm in here, I wouldn't want to overheat."

"You do look a bit flushed." Sinclair observes, "should I have them turn up the air conditioning?"

"Then I'll be cold." I argue.

Sinclair arches a brow, "then you'd better come over here so I can keep you warm." It wasn't a request. I rise from my chair and circle the table, sliding into the booth next to Sinclair even as he signals the waitress to lower the temperature in the room. He slides an arm around me and purrs with contentment. "There, much better."

Maybe for him, I'm squirming in my seat, painfully aware of the wetness pooling between my legs. In hindsight I can't even begin to follow the circular logic that brought us here – but I'm not complaining. I feel safe being so close to Sinclair, and the butterflies in my belly are fluttering out of control. It's not a date, it's not a date, it's not a date.

Of course it only gets worse as the night progresses. Our intimate dinner turns into him hand feeding me dessert, then leading me around a darkened dance floor with our bodies pressed flush together, whirling through unfamiliar, infinitely seductive steps. I haven't had a drop of alcohol given my condition, but I feel completely drunk on Sinclair. The evening flashes before my eyes, and I spiral into my desire: my world reduces to the feeling of his body moving against mine, his hands gliding over my waist and hips.

It's a good thing Sinclair is so intimidating or I might have tried to make a move, and I'm not sure I could survive getting involved with this powerful wolf. My body might want him, but when my senses return I'll remember how completely mismatched we are. We could never be together, and indulging my physical desires can only lead to disaster.

I'm slowly beginning to suspect that Sinclair isn't completely immune to me, but I know it could never be more than physical attraction on his part, and I'm not the sort of woman who can handle casual sex. I know I'll catch feelings sooner or later, and then I'll get my heart broken. Sinclair could never want me as more than an amusing distraction or plaything and more importantly, I'm carrying his child. I have to be able to get along with him for the rest of my life, and I know I'm not what he wants.

I fall asleep tossing and turning, until Sinclair loses his patience and pulls my body to his, spooning me and purring until I drift off. We went to bed late, but I wake up when it's still dark out, a sense of dread flooding my form.

Something is wrong.

There's wetness between my legs, but not the slick desire that tormented me earlier. I reach down and when I withdraw my fingers again, they're stained with sticky, red, blood.

Trying not to panic, I shake Sinclair awake. He groans and opens his eyes to slits, mumbling blearily.

"Sinclair, something's wrong!" I murmur frantically. "I'm bleeding. I think... I think I might be having a miscarriage."

Chapter 26 – At the Hospital

Ella

Sinclair is instantly alert. He sits up in bed and pulls the covers back, staring at the red stain on my nightgown with an unreadable expression. He presses his palm to my belly, undoubtedly trying to communicate with the pup through their mental link. I'm trembling while I wait for him to give his verdict, terrified that the new life inside me might already be coming to a heartbreaking end.

"I think he's okay." Sinclair murmurs after a moment, looking up at me with a furrowed brow. "But we should get you to the hospital right away."

I slide out of bed on autopilot, my mind spinning with all the terrible possibilities. What if my ovaries were too damaged by Mike's sabotage to support a healthy baby? What if my uterus isn't strong enough to carry the child to term? Was the doctor right at our last appointment, was something wrong from the start? Is that why it was so small?

I can only wrap my arms around myself to try and cease shaking as the blood rushes in my ears. Please don't take this baby from me. I silently beg the universe, it's all I have, I won't survive losing it.

Sinclair dresses quickly, but I'm only vaguely aware of him moving around in my periphery. I'm standing there frozen, too afraid to move in case I somehow make the bleeding worse. Without asking, Sinclair comes over and sweeps me up into his arms. He only pauses to wrap me in a coat before heading out into the snow, then bundles me into the car and takes off into the night.

We arrive at the emergency room in minutes and Sinclair doesn't even bother parking. Instead he skids to a stop in front of the main entrance, once again scooping me up and charging inside. I've been to the hospital before, and it's always been a long, drawn out process of triages and waiting to be seen for hours on end.

Not this time.

The moment the staff sees Sinclair they leap into motion, eager to do his bidding. I've never been more grateful for his wealth and influence than I am in this moment. Nurses and orderlies gather around us, leading us straight into the treatment area. The nurses bring forward a wheelchair, but Sinclair holds onto me tightly. "She's three weeks pregnant and bleeding."

Seeming to realize he's not going to release me, the nurses take the wheelchair away and direct us into a consultation room,

"Okay honey, just hold on." They advise, "we'll get someone over to take a look at you

right away.”

No sooner has Sinclair set me down onto a reclining gurney that an orderly comes in with a scratchy hospital gown and an ultrasound machine, shortly followed by a doctor in a white coat. The man nods to Sinclair, “Alpha.” Suddenly I realize the special treatment we’re receiving isn’t only because of Sinclair’s wealth. This must be a shifter hospital, which makes a lot of sense in hindsight. He wouldn’t take a werewolf child to a human facility.

Sinclair greets the man stiffly, still hovering protectively over me. I haven’t had time to change into the gown or even get comfortable on the gurney, and I find myself leaning towards Sinclairs solid strength, finding relief in his presence amidst all the hubbub and uncertainty.

“Is it alright if I examine her?” The doctor asks, nodding towards me.

This strikes me as a very odd question – first because it was directed at Sinclair and not me, and second because an exam is the entire reason we’re here. Of course it’s alright! However a low rumble sounds in Sinclair’s chest, and when I look up at him I realize how menacing his outward energy has become. He’s glaring at anyone who comes near me, and strategically placing his body between me and everyone else. He wouldn’t appreciate the comparison, but his behavior sort of reminds me of a dog guarding a bone.

I hiccup a hysterical laugh as the image forms in my mind – the big bad Alpha getting possessive about his new human pet- but when the doctor and Sinclair look down at me with concern I quickly sober. “Sorry, my nerves are fraying a bit.” I explain, prompting Sinclair to wrap one of his muscular arms around me.

Turning towards the doctor, I add. “I don’t know how long I’ve been bleeding, I just woke up and felt it.”

The doctor looks back to Sinclair, waiting until he gives his permission before approaching me. “Have you had any other symptoms?”

I shake my head, “nothing out of the ordinary. A bit of morning sickness, mood swings, cravings – everything you’d expect.”

“That’s good.” The doctor confirmed, offering me a smile before looking to Sinclair. “And the mental link?”

“Strong heartbeat and consistent emotional blips,” My stomach is quickly becoming Sinclair’s favorite spot to rest his hand, and it returns there now. “It’s sleeping – I think.”

The doctor nods, "Alright, then what I'd like to do is run some tests and make sure everything is alright with mother and pup.

Spotting isn't unusual in the early stages, though there's a bit more blood than I'd like. Ella, why don't you get changed and then a nurse will be in to run your vitals – then we'll take some blood and do an ultrasound."

He steps out, and before I can even think about changing, I find Sinclair pulling my nightgown off over my head. "Oh! Dominic, I can do that myself."

"Just let me take care of you, Ella." He responds sternly, leaving no room for argument as he fits the loose gown around my body. In the end, I think fussing over me is his way of finding some control in a helpless situation, so I comply without further complaint, telling myself it's all for his benefit rather than my own. I don't let myself think about how nice it feels to have someone helping me – not to have to go it all alone for once.

"Lie back now," Sinclair encourages once the ties are secure, helping me recline on the gurney. He leans his elbow on the mattress near my head, looking down at me intently. "How are you doing?"

His scrutiny feels too intense, and I can't bring myself to look him in the eye. I shrug, "I'll decide how I feel when we know what's going on."

Before he can respond the nurse returns and begins taking all my vital signs. Everything seems perfectly normal until she takes my blood pressure. She purses her lips at the numbers on the screen, and I feel my pulse race even faster when I follow her gaze. One forty over one hundred! I think frantically. My blood pressure has never been so high in my entire life.

"Is that reading normal for you?" The nurse asks with false nonchalance.

"No, my blood pressure is usually below average." I squeak, causing Sinclair to shift closer still.

He returns his hand to my belly, circling his fingers in soothing caresses over my skin. "You've had a scare." He reasons, looking to the nurse for reassurance, "I'm sure that's all this is."

She doesn't respond to his statement, instead eyeing me with concern. "You need to try to calm down, Ella. Take some deep breaths and let your mate worry about the pup."

"Let my mate worry about the pup?" I repeat indignantly, sitting up. "I'm its mother, I can't just turn off my love for it."

“She wasn’t suggesting that, sweetheart.” Sinclair croons, gathering me to his chest and purring in that infuriating way that never ceases to make me unravel. Against my will I find myself leaning into his protective hold, falling victim to that strange power once again.

“That’s it.” The nurse encourages with a smile, “everything else looks good, we’ll check your pressure again in a bit, and I’ll inform the doctor of the situation.”

I’m sulkily snuggling closer to Sinclair as she retreats and glaring daggers at her back. “How do you do that?” I inquire sullenly, breathing in the Alpha’s familiar scent.

“Do what?” He asks, stroking my hair.

“That purring thing!” I clarify, resenting him for making me feel better when my baby might be in danger, then feeling guilty for resenting him. My moods are so variable these days I can barely keep up with them. I’ve always heard how wild one’s emotions can become when pregnant, but I didn’t realize it would happen this fast.

Sinclair chuckles warmly, and an unwelcome shiver runs down my spine. “It’s something all male wolves can do – it’s how we soothe our mates when they’re upset.”

“Oh.” I blink. “How did you know it would work on a human?”

“I didn’t.” He shares, “I didn’t even mean to do it the first time – it was simply instinct, but you responded so beautifully.”

“Hmph.” I murmur, not sure if I like the idea of him having that kind of power over me. “Do female wolves have some way of soothing their mates?”

Sinclair laughs again, a deep sultry sound.. “Lots of ways.”

“Like what?” I press.

“That’s a conversation for another day.” Sinclair remarks slyly, piquing my curiosity.

I want to object, to ask more, but the doctor reappears before I can respond. He does my ultrasound with quick professionalism, and I’m relieved to hear the baby’s steady heartbeat through the machine. Still, I won’t be able to truly relax until I know everything is okay. When he finally concludes the exam, I’m practically breathless for news.

“Well?” I ask anxiously. “Is the baby okay?”

Chapter 27 – Mike Meets Sinclair

3rd Person

The doctor smiled at Ella and Sinclair, pleased to be able to deliver good news for once. “Your baby is just fine.” He shared, watching the tension seep out of the expectant parents in front of him. “As I said, some spotting is perfectly normal in the early stages, and everything else looks perfect.”

Sinclair squeezed Ella to his chest, kissing her hair while she tried not to burst into tears of joy. The doctor let them have a moment to celebrate before continuing, “I am worried about Ella’s blood pressure, however. It was probably just the stress of the emergency, but it’s something we have to be very careful of. If hypertension persists, it could develop into a condition called preeclampsia, which can be very dangerous for both mother and pup.”

Ella was still reveling in their good news, but Sinclair was immediately alert at the mention of a potential danger. “So what do we do? Just keep an eye on it?”

“I’m going to send you home with a portable test kit so you can check her blood pressure at home, you should do it every day until it stabilizes and then every week until delivery. Of course if it remains high you need to see your regular OBGYN right away.

And more than anything else, you need to avoid stress, Ella.” The physician advised.

Ella nodded in agreement, though in truth she wasn’t sure this goal was entirely achievable. She was about to be a first time mother, all the while grappling with a false identity, supernatural society, and political campaign. Stress seemed like an inevitability.

“Thank you doctor,” Sinclair professed, “we’ll do everything we can to keep her relaxed.” Ella wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that – if Sinclair tried to keep her on bed rest or anything of the sort, it wasn’t going to go over well. She was so lost in her thoughts, she didn’t realize Sinclair was watching her and all but reading her mind. “Won’t we, little mate?” He added pointedly.

This jolted Ella back to the present, and she looked up at Sinclair with wide eyes, thinking – not for the first time – that she needed to do a better job paying attention to the powerful Alpha if she wanted to get through this pregnancy with her wits intact.

“Yes, Dominic.”

That afternoon Sinclair struggled to focus on his work. All he could think about was Ella and the baby, and he was sorely tempted to take the rest of the day off to look after

them. He'd already blown off all his morning meetings for that very purpose, and though Ella had encouraged him to go about his business as usual, his mind was on anything but business.

He was just about to collect his things and tell Hugo he was calling it a day, when a knock sounded on his door. "Come in."

The investigator he'd hired to look into Ella and subsequently track down her lowlife ex-lover poked his head inside. "Alpha, he's here."

That got Sinclair's attention. Maybe he would be able to get something worthwhile done today after all. "Bring him in." He instructed coolly.

When Mike stumbled in the austere office a few minutes later – practically thrown inside by Sinclair's guards – he looked around in nervous confusion. Sinclair studied the human closely, trying to convince his wolf that attacking the wretched man wasn't a very honorable thing to do – considering his advantages in speed, strength and power. Still, it was tempting. He didn't know what Ella had ever seen in the man, and he suspected that Mike's mental manipulation and gaslighting had gone a long way towards forcing her to settle for someone so inferior.

For all her spirit and intelligence, Sinclair knew that Ella had suffered a love-starved upbringing. It wasn't hard to imagine that she could fall head over heels for the first person to show her any attention, even letting them convince her she didn't deserve any better than their mistreatment and disdain. He thought of Mike telling her she was a bad kisser, wondering how far the creep's insults had gone – did she also think she was bad in bed, bad at keeping a house or doing everyday things? How worthless had this human made her feel for his own gain?

It infuriated Sinclair to imagine anyone mistreating sweet Ella this way, and he was all the more impressed that she had been able to come out of the ordeal with so much strength of will. He growled before he could stop himself, and Mike froze in his tracks, staring at Sinclair in surprise and obvious fear. "What is this? Why did you bring me here?"

"This, is your just desserts." Sinclair answered coldly, rising from his chair. "Do you know who I am, Mike?"

"You're that billionaire that's always on TV." Mike countered, barely containing a jealous sneer.

"That's right." Sinclair smirked. "I'm also Ella's new fiance." He lied, going with a similar story to the one they were telling the shifters. "We're expecting a child together, despite your efforts to make her infertile."

All the blood drained from Mike's face. He stood frozen for a long moment before shaking his head in disbelief. "You're lying. We only just broke up and she would never have cheated on me, the stupid bitch was too spineless to -"

Sinclair's wolf snarled out a warning so fierce that Mike all but wet himself, suddenly realizing on an instinctive level that the being in front of him was no normal human – but a dangerous predator. "If you have any sense at all you'll shut your fucking mouth before you say another word against her." Sinclair thundered.

Mike backed away towards the door, trembling like a leaf. "I... wh- what are you?"

"Not anyone you want to cross." Sinclair informed him, prowling forward, stalking his vile prey as if he were nothing more than a deer in the woods.

"This is crazy!" Mike objected. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"Do not lie to me!" Sinclair barked, "I know everything, you leech. You took advantage of that angel, knowing exactly how vulnerable she was. You ruined Ella's life – wrecked her finances, poisoned her body, betrayed her commitment and made her think she didn't deserve any better!" Sinclair reached out and closed his powerful hand around the scrawny human's neck, forcing his back up against the door. "You are not a man, you are spineless, despicable little weasel, and if you want to keep your head on your shoulders you are going to make things right!"

"What?!" Mike choked, clawing at Sinclair's tight grip, "how?"

"You're going to go to the police, and sign a full confession. Ella already filed a police report, and you're going to turn yourself in and pay back every cent you stole from her." Sinclair commanded, "I don't care if you have to work for a hundred years, you're going to make it right."

"But I don't have that kind of money!" Mike objected frantically, becoming near hysterical as Sinclair lifted his feet off the ground.

In the back of his mind Sinclair momentarily worried about making a habit of attacking men this way, but he couldn't deny that Mike and Roger both deserved it.

"Then you can rot in prison!" Sinclair answered ferociously. "It's that or I gut you right here."

"No!" Mike shouted frantically, "Please, don't hurt me! I'll do whatever you say!"

"Good." Sinclair rumbled. "Because if you don't I will make you wish you'd never been

born.”

A little while later a shrill ringtone filled Ella’s suite at Sinclair’s estate. She picked up her phone, seeing the local police station’s number scrolling across the screen. “Hello?”

“Hello, Ms. Reina?” A male voice replied on the other end of the line.

“Speaking.” She confirmed.

“This is Moon Valley Police Department, we’re calling in reference to a report you filed last week?” The man referenced.

“Yes?” Ella questioned sitting up a little straighter. The officers hadn’t given her any hope that her case would ever be resolved, so she didn’t have the faintest idea why they were calling.

“Your ex-boyfriend turned himself in this afternoon.” The officer shared, “he doesn’t have the funds to pay the bills he accumulated in your name, but he signed a confession which should convince your creditors to remove the charges from your accounts, and he will be prosecuted to the furthest extent of the law.”

“I.. what? Really?” Ella couldn’t believe it. “How... Mike would never turn himself in, I don’t understand.”

“Well I can’t speak to his motives, but I can tell you he was dropped off by a pair of bodyguards employed by Dominic Sinclair, and he seemed very shaken. It sounds to me like you’ve got friends in high places, Ms. Reina.”

“Thank you.” She murmured, still trying to process this information. As she hung up she tried to comprehend this new development. Had Dominic really found Mike for her, forced him to do the right thing? She knew he’d promised to help resolve her financial situation, but making Mike stand trial seemed like a gesture far beyond their agreement.

What did it all mean?

Chapter 28 – Ella Pays A Visit

Ella

I hear Sinclair's footsteps coming up the stairs just past five, and I realize he must have left work at the earliest available opportunity. I'm not complaining, I've been so eager to ask him about Mike ever since the police called me, and as unbelievable as it seems I even find myself missing him the more time we spend apart. I think it must be the pup's craving to be near its father rather than my own interest, because more often than not I'm nervous or on-edge when we're together. The one exception is when I go to his rooms at bedtime; I haven't had a single nightmare since he insisted we begin sleeping together, and I look forward to falling asleep in his strong arms every night.

He comes into my rooms without knocking, offering me a wide smile when he sees me cuddled up in bed. The doctor gave me strict orders to rest today, and after the exhausting ordeal at the hospital, I actually didn't mind. "Hello trouble." Sinclair greets me fondly, taking a seat on the edge of my mattress. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." I promise, "No more spotting." I blush, but I figure we have to get used to speaking on such familiar terms about my body. Pregnancy does nothing if not steal one's sense of modesty, as the most personal bodily functions must be discussed to assess the baby's health.

"I'm glad." Sinclair sighs with visible relief. "Have you checked your blood pressure?"

"No, I've been distracted." I admit.

"Tsk, tsk," He teases, retrieving the home monitoring device from my bedside. "Let's have your arm, gorgeous."

I wait while he settles the cuff around my bicep and presses the machine's start button. Once the cuff begins to inflate and pressure increases on my arm, I say, "I got a call from the police today."

Sinclair keeps a perfectly straight face, as if he doesn't have the first idea what I'm about to say. "Oh?"

"It seems that Mike turned himself in this afternoon." I share, watching him closely. "He came all the way back from the coast and signed a full confession. He's going to stand trial."

Sinclair is busy watching the numbers on the machine, but he manages a distracted smile, "that's wonderful, Ella."

I wait for him to say more, but he remains silent, avidly focused on taking my vital signs.

“You’re really going to pretend like you had nothing to do with it?” I finally burst.

The machine beeps, and Sinclair frowns, loosening the cuff. “Still too high.” He murmurs, looking back up at me. Sinclair scans my features, taking my cheek in his oversized hand. “Are you still feeling stressed?”

“I’m trying to talk to you about something.” I reply, rather than answering him.

“Ella it was nothing. I would have done it for anyone.” He states simply.

Of course. I think bitterly, better not go getting ahead of yourself, Ella. Don’t make the mistake of thinking you’re special when you’re anything but. “That might be true.” I murmur, “but it’s a very big deal to me. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“That’s not necessary.” Sinclair responds, as if this settles the matter. “I was happy to do it. That rat deserved a lot worse than a jail cell if you ask me.”

I don’t know why, but his ferocity makes me feel better about his dismissive manner. At the very least it shows that he does care, and I decide then and there that I’m going to find a way to thank him – whether he thinks it’s necessary or not.

The next day I spend the morning sick to my stomach, reminding myself over and over again that morning sickness is a good sign, and I shouldn’t complain. After my fourth bout of nausea, I take a few pillows and books into the bathroom, setting up a makeshift camp on the cold tiles so that I’m not constantly running back and forth. By the afternoon I feel well enough to go out and about, and I eagerly dress and depart, excited to follow through with my plans to thank Sinclair for his kindness.

At first I wasn’t sure about turning up at his father’s house unannounced, but when I arrive the elder Alpha greets me with so much hospitality and generosity I decide I should try and visit more often. “Come in, come in! What a lovely surprise!”

“Thank you.” I flush, “I hope you don’t mind me dropping by like this.”

“Of course not, my darling. You’re welcome anytime.” He replies genially. “I was just about to have a late lunch, please join me.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t impose.” I demur.

“Nonsense, I know the look of a breeding mother who’s spent the morning indisposed.” He observes wryly. “You’re still green about the gills, dear one. Some food in your tummy will help.”

“Thank you.” I smile despite myself. “I see you’re as perceptive as your son.”

“And I see you would prefer it if he did not perceive so much.” The old man answers.

“Is it that obvious?” I chuckle, taking a seat across from him in the sitting room as a servant runs to get another place setting for lunch.

“I don’t blame you.” He confides. “I expect if I were in your shoes I wouldn’t enjoy having someone read my every thought and feeling either.”

Unlike Sinclair, his father sets me completely at ease. So at ease in fact that I find the words sliding off my tongue before I can stop them. “I’m not used to men like you and your son, Alpha -“

“None of that Alpha nonsense.” He interjects. “call me Henry.”

I can’t help but laugh, “you and Dominic really are a pair, you know that?”

Henry smiles warmly, “a high complement. I’m very proud of my son, you know. And I’m so thrilled he’s finally found his second chance mate.”

A stab of guilt assails me. Of any of the people we’re deceiving, Sinclair’s father makes me feel the most ashamed for our lies.

“Thank you.” I manage to reply, unable to stop myself from confiding, “we’re both so excited for this baby I’m not sure if we’ve even discussed whether we truly are mates. I mean we’re saying it for the campaign of course, but I hardly think I’m what Dominic imagined for a mate.”

Henry shakes his head firmly. “Trust me, Ella. I know my son, and I know a good match when I see it. You two will get there in time.”

“Well, I have to say he has already done so much for me. I’ve been scrambling for some way to thank him, but I’m afraid I don’t know him well enough to know what he’d like best. I was hoping you might help me do a bit of plotting.” I confess.

“You’ve come to the right place.” Henry assures me, “what kind of surprise did you have in mind.”

“Just anything to show him how grateful I am.” I explain, “how excited I am to be having this baby together, for all his support.”

“Well one secret I will gladly tell you about my son is that he has a powerful sweet tooth.”

Henry intones. "He doesn't indulge it often, but the quickest way to his heart is probably through dessert."

I giggle, "Really?" It seems so strange that the terrifying Alpha wolf might have a secret vice as wholesome as sugar. "Any particular recipes?"

"His favorite cake as a boy was simply chocolate with vanilla icing – simple but classic. If you make him that, it will transport him straight back to his childhood." Henry explains.

"I like that idea. One of our first days together he called my sister to find out my favorite dish – I like the symmetry of returning the gesture." I muse aloud.

"And of course, if you end up with too much left over, I always appreciate a good sweet myself." Henry hints, "As well as charming company."

"You have a deal." I agree happily. "In fact, I was thinking I might visit you more often." I suggest, "If you don't mind having me around that is."

"I would love nothing more." Henry beams, "though you should probably clear it with Dominic first."

I grimace, not caring for this idea. "Do you think he'd object?"

"I think he's got a new mate and a baby on the way – nothing makes an Alpha more overprotective." Henry reasons.

"But surely he wouldn't think you're a threat." I protest.

"Not me personally, but there may very well be other dangers out there." Henry suggests, "in fact I'm surprised he let you come out without a guard today."

"Well, he doesn't know." I answer hesitantly.

"You didn't tell him you were leaving?" Henry clarifies.

"No, but I'm an adult." I argue, confused. "I shouldn't have to ask permission just to pay a visit to family."

"Ella, you're with an Alpha now." Henry reminds me gently. "Everything is different now. Does anyone know where you are right now?"

"No." Nervously gnawing on my lip, I wonder if I've made a bad miscalculation. "Do you think he's going to be angry?"

“If I were you, I’d try to get back before he realizes you left.” Henry suggests.

I don’t need to be told twice, I finish my lunch and kiss Henry’s scruffy cheek, before heading out again. On the way home I stop only to purchase the ingredients for Sinclair’s cake, hurrying back to the house in the hopes that no one has noticed I was missing. Of course it’s just my luck that Hugo catches me coming up the walk to the mansion, arms laden with grocery bags.

He doesn’t say a word, but I know the game is up.

I’m in big trouble.

Chapter 29 – Ella Bakes

Ella

I've been avidly watching the clock ever since returning home. Neither Hugo nor any of the guards said a word about my absence, but they did immediately take the grocery bags from my arms, insisting I shouldn't be doing any heavy lifting. I came straight to the kitchen afterwards, hoping that I might be able to finish my surprise before Sinclair comes home, and thereby counteract some of his displeasure that I snuck out.

In my defense it wasn't really sneaking. Sure, I waited until the guards were distracted just in case they tried to stop me leaving, but no one ever told me I wasn't allowed to do so. In fact Sinclair told me I was free to go where I wish... though in hindsight I imagine the Alpha wouldn't like it if he came home and no one knew where I was – especially after the hospital yesterday.

I try to focus on baking rather than the scolding I've surely got coming from Sinclair. I'm really not sure how to handle the situation. It feels entirely unfair that I could be in trouble for breaking rules I didn't know existed, but I'm afraid of angering Sinclair further by expressing my true feelings.

I'm starting to feel completely bipolar in this arrangement of ours. I'm perpetually afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing and provoking Sinclair's temper, but I'm not used to censoring myself this way. Eventually the truth inevitably slips out and then I worry I've ruined everything. So I try to reverse course and do damage control, and probably come off like I've got split personalities.

I don't know what to do. I know I should try to keep Sinclair happy so that I have the best possible chance to stay with my baby, but I don't know how long I can keep this up. I also don't know what to make of Sinclair in the first place. He's the most confusing man I've ever encountered. I don't even recognize myself around him. One moment he's turning me on, making me feel safer than I've ever felt in my entire life, and doing sweet selfless things like helping Cora – and the next he's stomping around like a tyrant and ordering me about.

I've just finished mixing the wet and dry ingredients together in a big silver bowl when the door clicks open behind me, and Sinclair's familiar scent fills the room. Uh-oh, here we go.

When I turn around, I find him framed in the doorway, his arms crossed over his broad chest, and a thunderous expression on his face.

"Welcome home?" I greet him weakly, that statement sounding more like a question than anything else.

Sinclair's emerald eyes begin to glow as he studies me, raking his gaze over my body from head to foot and making me positively squirm. "What do you have to say for yourself, Ella?"

"I'm making you a surprise," I explain, realizing telling him sort of defeats the point. "Or I was – to thank you for your help with Mike."

"You left the estate." He growls, striding forward. "You didn't tell anyone you were leaving or where you were going."

"I was perfectly safe." I supply feebly. "I went to see your father."

"You just got out of the hospital yesterday." Sinclair rumbles, as if I could forget. "You shouldn't be lugging around groceries or going on extended walks, and especially not without guards."

"Dominic, you never told me that I needed to take guards with me if I went out, or that I had to run my plans by you first." I counter, trying to stay calm.

"Because I thought it was common sense!" He exclaims. "Ella, you know how crazy the media coverage has been lately, and you know I don't go anywhere without guards – and I'm a lot bigger and stronger than you are. What if something had happened- we wouldn't have known where to look for you!"

"I was just trying to do something nice for you!" I exclaim, fighting back tears. "I never agreed to be a prisoner here."

"Don't be so dramatic." Sinclair scoffs. "No one is saying you're a prisoner. But you are a public figure now, and you're in delicate condition. We're talking about taking basic precautions and keeping me in the loop. I need to know where you are, I need to know that you're safe and not taking careless risks!"

"Carrying a few bags of sugar is hardly a risk to my health!" I argue, smothering a few extra choice words. "I'm not so delicate that I need a constant babysitter. You forget that I was on my own for 30 years before you came along and I did just fine!"

"Oh right, so fine that a bottom dwelling asshole bankrupted and betrayed you for years on end!" Sinclair snaps.

"That isn't fair." I fight back, my voice thick with emotion. "Don't blame me for what Mike did!"

"I'm not." He sighs, seeming to regret his rash statement. "I wouldn't. But if you were vulnerable to scum like him in the human world, you're five times as vulnerable among

shifters. You don't know how dangerous it is out there!"

"And how am I suppose to know, if you don't tell me?" I demand. "How am I suppose to know I'm breaking your ridiculous rules if you don't even tell me what they are in the first place?"

"They aren't ridiculous, they're for your own safety!" Sinclair grits out.

"That didn't answer my question." I remark, narrowing my eyes.

"I'm sorry Ella, I didn't expect you to go galavanting around town when you're barely recovered! I thought you would come to me if you needed something." He grits out, his jaw ticking in annoyance.

"I don't want to have to come to you every time I want to set foot outside the house!" I cry, "I don't like having to rely on other people for things I'm perfectly capable of doing for myself."

"You mean you don't trust other people." Sinclair corrects me, cutting to the quick. "You feel safer doing everything for yourself, and you don't know how to ask anyone else for help – let alone believe they'll come through for you."

I don't know how he managed to figure that out. He isn't wrong – I've always preferred to do everything myself, because I learned the hard way that I'm the only person I can rely on when push comes to shove. But I've never told him this – I've never expressed this to anyone. "I meant what I said." I insist, stubbornly notching my chin up.

"I understand better than you think, Ella." Sinclair relates, softening his tone. "But you're supposed to be avoiding stress."

"What's stressing me out is you standing here yelling at me!" I accuse, tears burning in my eyes. "I was just trying to do something nice, I didn't know it would upset anyone!"

"Come on, now." Sinclair admonishes. "At least do me the courtesy of being honest – you couldn't have gotten out of this house unseen without trying."

"Or maybe your guards aren't as on top of things as you think they are." I bite back.

Sinclair narrows his eyes. "You managed to ditch guards specifically assigned to you, Ella."

"What?" I squeak. "Why do you have guards assigned to me?"

"Because you're pregnant with my pup!" He growls, "because I have enemies who would

target you at a moment's notice, which you very well know."

"Or maybe it's because you're just an invasive, overprotective ass!" I explode, "you haven't stopped bossing me around from the moment I got here!"

Sinclair's eyes flash dangerously, and the next thing I know he's prowling towards me across the kitchen. I back away until my body collides with the cabinets, suddenly wondering if I've pushed him too far. "Careful Ella." He warns, looming over me. He braces his hands on the counter on either side of my body, pinning me between his arms. He ducks his head so that his face is only a few inches from mine, and I feel the power and authority rolling off him in waves. "I've given you a lot of leeway so far because you don't know our ways, but if you keep speaking to me that way I won't be accountable for my actions."

My knees turn to jelly in the face of his anger, but somehow this fear isn't the same kind I've known in the past. I don't believe he'll hurt me, especially since I'm carrying his pup – as he keeps pointing out. No, his threats feel different – darkly sensual in a way I don't quite understand. All of a sudden I'm very curious to see what he'll do if I keep pushing him. I'm sorely tempted to test him, to see just how far I can push my luck. "Fine." I hiss. "I won't speak to you that way. I'll show you instead."

I reach for the bag of flour on my left, taking a handful in my fist. Before I can think better of it, I act, lobbing the flour right into his incredibly handsome face.

Chapter 30 – Food Fight

Ella

The flour collides with Sinclair's face in an explosion of white powder, covering his features in dense grains and fluttering through the air around us. A low growl rumbles in his chest, and fear slices through me as I wonder if I've made a grave mistake. Sinclair takes a moment to open his eyes after the flour hits, but when he does, his wolf is glowing bright in his irises, and my instincts take over.

I try to duck under his arms, to evade his hold anyway I can. However the moment I begin attempting escape he leans forward, crushing my body between him and the counter. At once I'm reminded of how much larger Sinclair is. Sometimes it's easy to be fooled when I'm dressed up in heels or there's space between us, but now I can feel how helpless I am beside him. The top of my head barely reaches his sternum, and next to his muscles, my slender limbs feel terribly frail.

Sinclair's breath is coming in heaving gasps, and I have the good sense to remain frozen as he tries to gain control of his wolf.

When I look up at him, I can see only the wild animal fuming beneath his skin, and I realize exactly how dangerous this man is.

I'm not sure if he's going to attack me, or yell at me, and my heart is racing a mile a minute. I instinctively flinch when he moves, but he doesn't raise a hand against me. Instead he reaches past me towards the bowl of chocolate cake batter, and the next thing I know, a river of the thick, sweet mixture is dripping down my face.

I gasp in shock, realizing that Sinclair is pouring the batter over me, and try to jerk away. "Dominic, no!"

A dark laugh rolls through the big wolf like thunder, "Oh baby, you asked for this."

I raise my arms over my head, trying to protect myself, but when that doesn't work I reach for the bowl too, returning fire with handful of batter straight into Sinclair's expensively tailored shirt. Soon we're wrestling over the bowl, trying to retrieve more sweet ammunition to splatter each other with, and I'm laughing harder than I can remember laughing in a very long time.

The sound of Sinclair's own cozy chuckles fill my ears as I trade out cake batter for icing, reaching up with two hands and smearing it over his face as he playfully nips at my fingers, before positively squealing as warm, melted chocolate is drizzled over the low cut top of my dress, seeping down between my breasts and into my bra.

We're both absolutely covered in the various cake components, giddy with laughter and

still searching for new ways to combat one another. The bowls on the counter are already empty, and I narrow my eyes at Sinclair as I contemplate moving to the pantry or fridge for more ammo. His white teeth flash, and the next thing I know he's racing towards the fridge faster than I can even comprehend.

I dart to the pantry, pulling open the door to use as a shield and disappearing inside, zeroing in on a bottle of caramel syrup, even as I see Sinclair plucking a can of whipped cream from the fridge. Soon we're stalking around the kitchen island, trying to get close enough to squirt each other with our chosen item, and inevitably laughing and racing away when the other gets too close.

I try to feint around the edge of the counter, making him think I'm going to go in a direction other than the one I intend, but I'm outmatched in this game in every possible way. Sinclair is bigger, stronger and faster, and he can read my intentions far better than I can read his.

He snatches me easily, spraying me with cold whipped cream until I manage to wriggle free, even though I know he's letting me escape. If he wanted to he could have easily pinned me in place, but we're both having too much fun with our game.

It's making an unholy mess, but I can't remember the last time I had this much fun. Sinclair has completely surprised me too – I never expected him to have a playful side, and it's so different from the men I've known before. Mike and I certainly never did anything like this, and I doubt my ex would have had the inclination or the confidence to let a woman defy him this way. Sinclair, on the other hand, has no doubts about his masculinity. He can gladly let me tease and defy him without feeling threatened, because he knows at the end of the day his dominance is complete.

Too late I realize I'm thinking about Sinclair in comparison to my past lovers, when I know he doesn't see me this way at all. Yet I can't help it, the more time that passes the more certain I feel that Sinclair is attracted to me. I know it's only physical and that I could never be anything but a plaything to him, but it feels nice to be desired – even if it is superficial.

When the bottle of caramel is empty, I try to make my way back to the pantry, but Sinclair has other ideas. "Come here you." He purrs, snatching me up. "Such a bad girl." His fingers are digging into my sides, tickling me ruthlessly and making me giggle and squeal uncontrollably. I try to wrestle him for dominance, but I know it's a lost cause.

We tumble to the floor together, wrestling and writhing against one another, getting more and more dirty with every minute that passes. Sinclair lets me pin him to the tiled floor, straddling his middle and trapping his hands above his head. "Ha!" I declare triumphantly, secretly needing him to prove my victory false, to take control and make me forget my own name.

“Oh, you think you’ve won, do you?” He taunts, grinning up at me.

“You’re not so scary, you know.” I counter, smiling widely. “What would all those big tough wolves say if they knew their leader was letting a weak little human throw food in his face?”

The next thing I know I’m on my back with Sinclair looming above me. The air leaves my lungs in a great whoosh – I didn’t even see him flip me, but suddenly our situations are completely reversed. I’m still straddling Sinclair, my legs spread on either side of his body so that his hardness is pressed to my most sensitive flesh through our clothes. “They’d say, lucky Alpha.” He answers smugly, looking down at me with undiluted hunger.

The little voice in my head has me metaphorically squirming, needing to apologize for reasons I don’t understand. It’s almost as if I feel compelled to submit now that Sinclair has physically bested me, but why would that be the case? I try to hold the words back, but I can’t stop them no matter what I try. “I am sorry I snuck out.” I confess, peeking up at him from beneath my lashes.

“You’re forgiven.” Sinclair rules gently, “As long as you promise not to do it again.”

My metaphorical squirming becomes very literal now, though I freeze almost immediately when I realize the way my nervous movement rubs my sensitive sex against his. Softening, I agree, “I promise.”

I don’t understand what’s happening to me. I have all of these strange emotions bubbling up inside me. Is it all just the pregnancy, the pup making me feel and behave more like a wolf, or is it something more than that. “That’s my girl.” Sinclair praises, looking down at me with obvious pride.

“What are you doing to me?” I murmur, before I can stop myself.

“What do you mean?” He asks, frowning slightly.

“I don’t know.” I huff, “I just feel like a different person since we met.”

“Maybe you’re becoming the person you were always meant to be.” Sinclair suggests, shifting so that my wrists are captured between one of his strong hands, while the other slides down my body. “It’s finally safe to come out of your shell, so you are.”

“I think you’re giving yourself an awful lot of credit.” I respond primly, even as I fight the desire to lean into his touch. “And it’s a shame you were such a jerk.” I add pointedly, “now you won’t get to taste the cake I made.”

Sinclair arches his brow, gazing down at my batter covered body and adopting a devilish expression. Before I know what's happening, he's lowered his mouth to the swell of my breast and is licking the cake batter from my skin, groaning with delight.

"Delicious." He praises, rising up over me again. His eyes drift to the curve of my full lips, then the whipped cream splattered across my clavicle – as if he can't decide what to taste next. A low purr vibrates against my skin, "I want more."

Chapter 31 – Rogue Attack

3rd Person

Sinclair was tired of fighting his instincts. Ella was looking up at him with heavy-lidded eyes, the scent of her arousal heavy in the air. Why was he fighting his desire for her? So she was human – she was also beautiful, spirited and bright, everything he could want in a woman. It was exhausting trying to rein in his wolf, and he was tired of denying himself. The fact was that Sinclair wanted Ella more intensely than he could remember wanting anyone. The logical part of his brain insisted it was just the pup growing in her womb, but the more time that passed the more the Alpha believed it was the woman herself.

Sinclair dipped his head until their mouths were mere inches apart, and Ella sighed and tilted her chin up – offering her lips for the taking. He was about to claim them when a knock sounded at the door, followed by a low squeak and a familiar man's voice,

“What on earth?”

Sinclair turned to look at Hugo, who was frozen in the doorway, staring at the food-splattered kitchen and the couple on the floor in abject shock. “Not now.” Sinclair growled, his wolf clamoring just beneath the surface of his skin.

Hugo met the Alpha's piercing gaze, “Dom -“

“I said not now.” Sinclair repeated fiercely.

“Trust me.” Hugo stated resolutely, “you want to hear what I have to say.”

Grumbling with annoyance, Sinclair looked back to Ella, sorely tempted to tell her not to move a muscle until he returned.

However he knew that if Hugo was being this persistent, he probably wasn't going to be back anytime soon. It filled him with regret that he wouldn't be able to lick all the chocolate from Ella's sweet body himself, or even help her wash away the remnants in a steaming shower. His mind was overflowing with all the sensuous possibilities, but the best he could do was promise the little human that, “we'll finish this later.”

He helped Ella to her feet before taking his leave, grabbing a dish towel on the way out to wipe the flour, chocolate and syrup from his face. “What's up?” He asked Hugo, once they were alone.

“There's been a rogue attack in old town.” The Beta shared gravely. “It looks like there's quite a few fatalities.”

Sinclair cursed, “any hints on who’s responsible?”

“Witnesses say the attackers came out of nowhere. They burst onto the canals and started wreaking havoc.” Hugo explained.

“It’s clear they were sent to harm, no one reported having anything stolen.”

Sinclair’s wolf – already fighting for control – reared up inside him, overwhelmed by urgent concern for his pack members. There hadn’t been a rogue attack in a very long time, and he highly doubted that the timing of this incident was a coincidence. “I’ll shower as fast as I can, and I’ll be right there.”

The scene of the attack was worse than Sinclair could have imagined.

Moon Valley’s old town was normally an enchanting place at this time of year. With its idyllic maze of canals woven through historic buildings and blanketed in thick white snow, it should have looked like a winter wonderland – if it weren’t for all the blood.

Ever since the river froze a few weeks earlier, the waterways became bustling thoroughfares dotted with pop up shops to be navigated by humans and shifters on ice skates. They weren’t as grand as they’d be after the solstice celebrations began the following week, but they certainly shouldn’t have looked like this.

At least a dozen bodies littered the ice, and thick crimson pools steamed then froze solid on the glassy surface. Keening filled the air as shifters mourned and injured beings suffered on the sidelines, tended to by concerned bystanders and emergency responders. Sinclair scanned the carnage – noting that all the victims were wolves, not that this came as a surprise. This part of the city was dominated by estates passed down through generations of wealth which, combined with the steep rents on new properties and high end businesses, all but guaranteed the inhabitants were shifters.

Moon Valley’s human mayor was already on the scene, but she was only there for appearances sake. Human tourists might visit to take in the natural splendor, but old town was strictly under Sinclair’s jurisdiction. Sighing with resignation, Sinclair approached the austere woman. “Madame Mayor.”

“Alpha,” She replied tersely, “I presume this was your kind’s doing?”

“Definitely a wolf attack.” He confirmed, ignoring the clear disdain in her voice. “My investigators are on the case.”

“You know this isn’t the kind of press our city needs – just before the holidays too. It’s

high tourist season.”

“It’s the holidays for us as well,” Sinclair reminded her. “And you would do well to recall that I don’t blame you when humans wreak havoc in the territory.”

“That’s because my kind is no threat to yours.” The mayor quipped.

Sinclair scoffed, “Right, that’s why we exist in secret – because humans are so accepting of those who are different.”

The Mayor, like all human mayors of Moon Valley, had been less than amused to discover the existence of shifters when she took office two years earlier. Nor could she ever fully wrap her mind around the power dynamics. It never ceased to confuse her that the monarchy resided in Moon Valley but did not rule the pack directly, rather delegating power to the territory’s Alpha.

Sinclair, on the other hand, thought it was pure stubbornness on her part – since she had no problem understanding state versus federal governance in her own society.

“And I suppose this has nothing to do with your campaign?” She questioned. “The Prince’s statement yesterday was quite damning.”

Sinclair blinked. What statement? Had he really been so distracted by Ella that he missed an important development in the race?

It was a silly question. As soon as he asked it of himself he knew the answer was yes. He’d become so preoccupied with the lovely human over the last couple of weeks that he’s thought of little else – including the campaign. Sure he kept his appointments and appearances, but his mind was rarely focused on the matter at hand. It was permanently locked on Ella. In fact, now that he reflected on it – he’d scarcely thought of anything else since she’d come begging for her sister’s job – even before he knew about the pup.

If he’d missed a major statement by the prince, then she wasn’t only a distraction, but a dangerous one. If he’d been paying attention, would he have seen this attack coming? He could imagine the kind of drivel the statement included – was the Prince behind the attack too? He wouldn’t put it past him, and there was no doubt this was going to hurt him. At the end of the day this was his city, not the Prince’s and the attack would make him look like an Alpha who couldn’t protect his people.

Guilt washed over him in a tidal wave. The criticism would be true either way. Whether a political scheme, or a genuine rogue threat, he had failed to secure old town. He had failed to protect his people, and the death surrounding him was his fault. The lives of all Moon Valley shifters were in his hands, and he’d let these slip through his fingers – worse, he hadn’t even noticed it happening.

If not for Ella this might never have happened. He wasn't blaming her, far from it – he knew he was the only one to blame. It was his distraction with the human beauty which allowed this to happen, and if it was a princely plot, then it was his heir and his campaign which were responsible.

The mayor, seeing Sinclair had disappeared into his thoughts, shifted away to make a statement to the media, leaving the Alpha with his guilt. He'd always hated seeing any of his people hurt – but this was the first time he knew without a doubt that they were hurt because of him. Suddenly the reasons that he'd been fighting his instincts when it came to Ella and his desire, came rushing back to him like a wildfire. His wolf might want her, but taking his eye off the ball at this stage in the game was dangerous to all of them.

Even as he thought this morbid fact, his eye caught on a flash of silver in his periphery. Turning, he looked up at the raised street running parallel to the canal. There was a sleek town car parked near the bridge, and a crowd of shifters gathered at the railing, looking down on the bloody tableau so many feet below them.

Sinclair recognized the Prince immediately, with his sleek blonde hair and gaudy clothes. The other man gazed over the crime scene with cold disinterest, until he finally met Sinclair's gaze. He arched one blond brow and shook his head, as if in disappointment, but he couldn't keep the smirk from his face. A moment later the human mayor appeared at his side, murmuring in his ear.

Ice froze the blood in Sinclair's veins, and he looked to Hugo, a grave expression on his handsome face. "Tighten Ella's security as soon as possible." He commanded. "I want eyes on her at all times."

Chapter 32 – Ella Has a Visitor

Ella

I scrub the food from my body as steaming water pours down around me in a blissful cascade. A hot shower is exactly what I needed, but I feel like a silly school girl starcrossed in puppy love. I can't stop replaying the events in the kitchen in my mind, reliving every word, every touch – every look from Sinclair's penetrating green eyes.

I find myself running my hands over my bare skin in the same places he stroked and caressed me, imagining what he'll do when he comes home. I know he was going to kiss me before Hugo interrupted us, and the memory of his lips so near mine sends shivers of excitement down my spine. Sinclair has kissed me before of course, but never in private, never simply because he wanted to.

My mind races with the possibilities. Will he make love to me when he returns? Is his attraction that strong? I can't stop imagining it. Will he be gentle and tender the way he's been when I most needed comfort? Will he be rough and dominating, unleashing the animal within? Or will he be some combination of the two, passion in all its varying forms?

I finally pull myself out of my daydreams when the water runs cold. I yelp when the heat disappears, dousing me in icy reality.

What am I doing? Who is this silly, sex-crazed girl who's taken over my mind? Sinclair and I don't have a future together, so why am I letting the little voice in my head get so carried away with longing for the impossible? That's not me – I've always been practical and realistic, not some starry eyed dreamer. Shaking myself, I cut off the water and grab a towel, determined to stop being so silly.

No sooner have I stepped out of the shower that a knock sounds at the bedroom door. "Miss, you have a visitor!" A maid calls through the thick wooden panel.

I do? This is a surprise. No one has ever visited me here, and the only person who might is Cora – but it's the middle of the day, surely she's at work. Even though I rationalized this, I'm still surprised when I get downstairs it's not Cora waiting for me. It's just about the last person I would have expected to see – Sinclair's estranged brother, Roger.

"Hello Ella." He greets me, standing from his chair.

I freeze in the doorway of the sitting room, unable to process the sight before me. "What are you doing here?"

"Easy now." He raises his hands in supplication, "I come in peace."

“Excuse me if I find that hard to believe.” I cut.

“I came to apologize for the way I behaved the day we met. I’m ashamed to say that my brother brings out the worst in me. It was wrong to take that out on you.” Roger states remorsefully.

“You know I really don’t understand you two.” I confess. “Where I come from, siblings are all you have – the only friends, the only family or allies. It seems very strange to me that you and Dominic are so at odds.”

“Where do you come from?” He asks thoughtfully.

“The shadow pack.” I’ve told the lie so many times now that I don’t even have to think about it. “But my parents died when I was young.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.” He says, sounding surprisingly genuine. “But it’s different for Dom and I. Your circumstances pushed you and your siblings together, ours tore us apart. Being the sons of an Alpha sets you in competition with one another from a young age. Our father never encouraged it, but we always knew that one of us would rule one day – and we both wanted to prove ourselves.”

“That must have been difficult.” I empathize, remembering what Sinclair also told me about their mother’s death. “But it doesn’t excuse the things you said to me.”

“Ella, I truly am sorry.” He professes again, raising a finger to qualify his statement. “At least, for the way I spoke to you. But I’m afraid I can’t apologize for the things I said.”

My shoulder’s stiffen. “Shouldn’t it be the reverse?”

“No, because I wasn’t lying.” Roger frowns deeply. “I may have been speaking spitefully but my heart was in the right place.”

I cut my eyes to him, “I don’t think spite can ever be the right place.”

“I was trying to warn you.” Roger insists, “And I’d warn you again if you’ll let me.”

“I’ll listen to what you have to say.” I concede, my morbid curiosity burgeoning. “but I won’t promise to take it to heart.”

Roger sighs, almost seeming relieved. “What has Dom told you about Lydia?” He asks.

I’m taken aback for a moment. I remember Roger’s harsh words about how I was nothing but a womb to him, that he’d toss me aside as soon as the pup came along, but I wasn’t expecting him to bring up Lydia. “That they were fated, but she left when he

couldn't give her children." I summarize simply.

"And did he mention that she hasn't had pup with her chosen mate either?" Roger presses.

"No, why would he?" I inquire, though I can already see where this is going.

"They always assumed the root of fertility struggles lied with him." Roger explains, "But now that it's clear that he can father children after all, I guarantee she'll be back."

"Just because she comes back, it doesn't mean Dominic will accept her." I remark coolly. In my head I'm thinking that he won't be so quick to forgive a mate who turned her back on him, fated or not, but I also have to remember I'm supposed to be Dominic's second chance mate. I need Roger to think I'm confident enough in our bond that Lydia's return wouldn't challenge it.

"Ella," He says my name as if it's an apology itself. "They're fated. Take it from someone who learned the hard way – chosen mates can be wonderful, but the Goddess's bond is stronger than all else."

"It happened to you?" I ask, intrigued by his statement.

Roger laughs, "I see Dom left out that part of the story, did he?"

"What part?" I clarify uncertainly.

"Lydia was my lover first." He reveals. "She'd agreed to a formal mating ceremony and everything. We knew we weren't fated, but we thought our love would be strong enough. Then Dominic came of age, and their bond came to life. Everything that had once been between us... disappeared overnight."

"Dominic stole Lydia from you?" I can barely stop myself from gaping with the surprise of this news. Sinclair certainly hadn't shared that part of the tale when he explained Roger's disdain for him.

"They were fated." Roger shrugs, much more accepting that I would have been about the situation. "Neither of them had a choice in the matter... and he won't have a choice when she comes back either."

"And you're certain she'll return?" I prompt.

"I'm sure of it." Roger relates gently. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this... and I hope I'm wrong. But you should prepare yourself. I wish I'd had someone to warn me this way."

“Well thank you for telling me. I’ll take your advice into consideration.” I reply honestly.

I thought about Roger’s words for a long time after he left. I still don’t trust the man, after all he definitely has a chip on his shoulder when it comes to Sinclair. I’m curious about why Sinclair left out the details about his past relationship with Lydia, but not enough to believe Roger hook, line and sinker.

Besides, true or not it doesn’t really change anything at the end of the day. Roger thought he was warning me, but he doesn’t know I’m human, that I’ve already been warned and indeed, prepared for a new mate to come into Sinclair’s life eventually anyway. Sure, I wasn’t expecting it to be Lydia – but the identity of the woman doesn’t really matter, I’ll cease being Luna regardless.

I’m still glad of the idea that my baby might have half siblings one day, but it is an important reminder to protect my heart. I was already questioning myself before Roger turned up, and his cautionary tale just reinforces the need to shield my heart against the Alpha. If I keep carrying on this way, mooning over a man who is completely out of my reach and letting my feelings get completely carried away, I’ll basically be asking for heartbreak.

Sinclair might be build for casual sex, but I’m not, and that means I have to stop the flirtation before it goes too far.

That night, I go to sleep in my own bed for the first time in a week. I don’t expect to be missed. Sinclair still isn’t home, and after what I heard this afternoon – I’m glad for some time alone. The last thing I need is for Sinclair to come home and truly attempt to finish what we started this afternoon. No matter how badly I might want to indulge those desires – I know they’re a recipe for disaster.

Half-asleep, it seems that a person came to my bedside. Who?

Chapter 33 – Sinclair Returns

Sinclair

I smell Roger the moment I walk through the door. My wolf is immediately alert, and I approach the first guard I see. “Was my brother here?”

“Yes Alpha.” The man replies. “He requested a meeting with Ella, and she granted it.”

I do not like the sounds of that. “How long was he here? Is she alright?”

“They spoke for close to an hour.” The guard replies. “She didn’t seem upset afterwards, but she went to bed early and without supper.”

Worry simmers in my belly. If Roger was here it was undoubtedly to make trouble, and while Ella might have simply been exhausted, I don’t believe these events are unrelated. I haven’t eaten either, but I head straight upstairs to check on the mother of my pup. However when I reach my rooms, Ella isn’t there.

Instead I make my way downstairs to her suite, concern tying my insides into knots. I push open the bedroom door, following the luscious aroma that is Ella, and stalk silently inside. She’s curled up beneath the covers, sleeping as sweetly as can be. I’m smiling despite my inner turmoil, moving to sit by her side as she doses.

Ella is lying on her stomach, her arms folded up beneath her pillow, her rose gold hair spilling over her bare shoulders in a silky cascade. I brush a few locks away from her face, content to simply watch her sleep. She looks so angelic like this, and I feel a fresh wave of worry for what Roger might have said to her. Did she go to bed in her own rooms because I wasn’t home, or because Roger upset her?

I’ll kill him if he’s said or done anything to harm her. The thought circles ominously around me for a long moment, and I’m a bit taken about by the force of my conviction. I feel so protective of this little human – is it really only because she’s carrying my baby?

After a minute Ella’s brow furrows and she whimpers in her sleep. I worry she might be having another nightmare, which brings on yet another flood of possessive energy. What happened in her life that haunted her dreams this way? Was she reliving past horrors, or simply imagining terrors which haven’t actually come to pass? Something about the way she refused to talk about the last one makes me suspect the former.

I push the covers down only far enough to expose the curve of her spine, needing to feel her shape beneath my fingers. When I stroke one large hand down the graceful column she stirs and stretches, turning towards me and unconsciously cuddling closer.

She blinks her brilliant eyes open a moment later, offering me a bleary eyed yawn.

“You’re back.”

“I am.” I agree, “And you’re in the wrong bed.” I tease, petting her slender waist and marveling at how small she is compared to me. The breadth of my hand easily circles her ribs, and I wonder if my fingers would actually touch if I tried to wrap my other hand around her middle.

“Mmm,” She moans, the sound like a sultry torment to my oversensitized ears. “You weren’t here.”

“As if that’s any excuse.” I mockingly scold.

“Are you going to make me move?” She murmurs, though her eyes have already closed again and she sighs contentedly as I continue to caress her.

“I should.” I muse, “I should make you get up and have the dinner you skipped.”

Ella peeks one eye open then, pouting in a way that does nothing to garner my sympathy and everything to make me contemplate claiming her plump, pink lips. “Your servants are tattle tales.”

“Uh-huh.” I chuckle, trying to keep my tone light as I continue, “they also told me about your visit with Roger.”

Ella hums with indignation, but doesn’t say more.

“Would you like to tell me what he wanted?” I ask after a moment.

“He was warning me.” She yawns.

“What about?” I rumble, fearing I already know the answer.

“Nothing I didn’t already know.” Ella shrugs sleepily. “That your mate will come along one day and you’ll no longer need me to be Luna.”

Only the sight of Ella contentedly stretching into my touch like a sleepy kitten keeps me from jumping to my feet and growling.

“He has no business saying such things to you.”

“Why not?” She purrs, “It’s true.”

I don’t know why it bothers me so much to hear her speak that way – but it does. “You know that and I know that – but he things you’re my second chance mate like everyone

else. He thinks you're a she-wolf and he has no right to interfere." The truth is that he completely crossed a line. Ella isn't familiar enough with our ways to understand how egregious his behavior truly was. If she was truly my mate and another man came along and told her I didn't actually care for her, I would be well within my rights to challenge him.

Still, Ella isn't my mate, and though I genuinely hate hearing her talk about a future where we aren't together, I know she's being pragmatic. That's the arrangement we agreed upon. She would be equally justified to dissolve our agreement if she met a man.

Before I've even finished the thought, my wolf is roaring in my head, driven over the edge by the idea of Ella being with anyone else. It takes all my willpower to keep him reined in, and I'm glad Ella is only half awake. I'm sure it's just the pup growing in her belly – I wouldn't care otherwise, but as long as she's carrying my child, the idea of another man – even a human – coming near her makes me absolutely furious. I breathe in a deep sigh, trying to get my wolf back under control. Of course this only amplifies her delicious scent, and my wolf becomes distracted once more.

"You washed off my scent again." I observe, thankful that my voice sounds much calmer than I feel.

Ella flushes despite her foggy state. "I had to – I was covered in chocolate and whipped cream and who knows what else."

Oh how quickly things can change, I think sadly. This afternoon I wanted nothing more than to lick every inch of her body clean, and now I'm glad the temptation is gone. If I'd gone down that road there would have been no turning back, and this afternoon was a cautionary tale I won't soon forget. Ella and I have to find a way to move forward in our agreement without all the pent up sexual tension – maybe she realized the same thing after Roger's visit. Maybe that's the real reason she chose to sleep in her own bed.

I see the logic of it, and yet I can't seem to stop myself from flirting. "Hmm, and who's fault was that?"

"Yours." Ella replies easily, still not opening her eyes.

"Oh really? I seem to remember you throwing the first handful." I remind her amusedly.

Again that sumptuous pout, more tempting than she could possibly realize. "You provoked me."

"Such a temper." I tease, running my fingers through her long hair. "if I didn't know any better I'd think you were a wolf."

“I think I’d like to be one.” She confesses wistfully, “Just to shift and experience what it would be like to be that free.”

I can hear the emotion in her voice clear as day, even though she’s not truly awake. Her words make me wonder what Ella would be like as a wolf, and I have to admit I find the idea more plausible than I would for most humans. She’s so strong of will and spirit, clever, intuitive, both deeply independent and pack oriented – she’s even skittish like she’s wrangling a wild inner animal.

Suddenly I find myself wishing that she was a wolf too, so we could be together without all these complications. “What am I going to do with you, Ella?”

I can’t afford these distractions, and I need to be caring for my family and the pack, not rutting Ella senseless. I’m not even sure if she could withstand the affections of a wolf. She’s so small, so delicate. I can’t risk her or the pup. I have to simply be grateful she’s safe, and give up hoping for more – for both our sakes.

She rolls onto her back, looking up at me curiously. “Earlier you said ‘we’ll finish this later.’” She reminds me. “What did you mean?”

Damn. I’d meant I was going to kiss her until she forgot her own name and take her to bed, but I’ve seen the error of my ways only too well today. “I meant we’d finish talking about security and setting boundaries.” I lie instead. “But we can talk about that tomorrow.”

Chapter 34 – Ella Learns About the Solstice

Ella

I wake up alone in bed, and promptly rush to the restroom to empty the contents of my stomach. When I finally emerge, I find Aileen waiting for me, a breakfast tray in her hands and a kind smile on her face. “How are you doing, my love?”

“I am thankful my baby is growing big and strong.” I recite, clutching my belly and repeating the same mantra I keep employing whenever the morning sickness or mood swings act up.

Aileen chuckles, “but you feel like hell?” She guesses.

I nod pitifully, and Aileen offers me a steaming cup of tea. “Here, have some of this. When I was carrying my pips nothing banished the sickness better.” I take a sip of the herbal brew, sighing happily as warmth fills me up from the inside out. “That’s it.”

Aileen encourages. “I can already see some color coming back into your cheeks.”

“More Luna lessons today?” I guess, thanking her kindness with a wide smile and a squeeze of her soft hands.

“And not a moment too soon.” She reports, “We shouldn’t have put it off this long with the holidays coming up so soon, but Dominic wanted to give you time to rest.”

“The holidays?” I repeat, the wheels slowly turning over in my mind. Her words take a moment to sink in, I’m so ravenous after going to bed without supper that it’s all I can do not to shove my face full of the cream scones and raspberry jam laid out on the breakfast tray. “Of course,” I eventually murmur, “It hadn’t even occurred to me that if you have your own gods you’d have your own holidays and traditions.”

Aileen smiles kindly. “It’s alright, this is all a lot to take in, but we don’t have much time to waste either. The Winter Solstice is next week, and you are going to be very busy, my dear.”

I know enough about ancient pagan traditions to know that the Winter Solstice is the longest night of the year, but beyond that I’m fairly clueless about how werewolves might celebrate the occasion. “What happens at the Winter Solstice?”

“Well, it’s all about honoring nature and the goddess, rebirth, transformations and new beginnings – finding light in the dark half of the year. It’s really beautiful. The week before the solstice day is seven days straight of different festivals and activities, I’ve got a calendar around her somewhere.” She adds, moving back towards the breakfast tray and searching through the contents. “It’s all wonderful: bonfires, drinking and dancing,

parading through the streets and decorating the city, lighting candles, giving gifts.

Then there's feasts and rituals, and it all culminates in a grand ball at the Royal Palace."

Her words ring a few bells in my mind. I've always known there are exclusive parties and festivals in the city's wealthiest neighborhoods, but I always assumed they were for the human holiday celebrations, not anything supernatural. I've never attended because I've never had the money or access to such entertainment, but it also sounds like Aileen is talking about events far more extensive than the few of which I'm aware.

"A ball?" I repeat, latching onto her last comment. "Like... an actual ball?"

"I take it you've never been to one?" Aileen surmises, arching a brow.

I simply laugh, "When would I have ever had the opportunity? The only humans who have them are rich and famous!"

"I see," Aileen muses. "Well, I knew I was going to have to teach you our dances, but I suppose we'll have to be a bit more thorough regarding etiquette and the like."

I remember the dances Sinclair showed me at the shifter club, and my heart begins to pound. "What kind of dances?"

"Nothing like what you're thinking." Aileen assures me. "I swear they're all perfectly tasteful."

"And the festivals and rituals?" I gulp, remembering Sinclair's teasing about humans being prudish and repressed.

"Now they can get a bit scandalous, but I promise Sinclair will be with you every step of the way." She promises.

Sure, I think, a bitter taste in my mouth. I've heard that before. Before I can say anything of the sort or ask any additional questions, Aileen abruptly stops rustling through the tray, "Aha! Here it is!" She offers me a sheet of parchment, and I look down at the page with trepidation and awe.

Moon Valley Solstice Festival Schedule of Events

Night 1: Bonfire Night – Wulver Hill

Night 2: Solstice Procession – Old Town

Night 3: Yuletide Feast – Midwinter's Fair

Night 4: Wassailing – Central Canal

Night 5: Moon Bathing – Moon Valley Stone Circle

Night 6: The Wild Hunt – the King's Forest

Night 7: Masquerade Ball – the Royal Palace

"Aileen, I don't know what half these things are! More than half!" I exclaim, feeling suddenly and profoundly out of my depth.

"It's okay." She croons, "you'll take it one day at a time, and you'll be an expert in shifter solstice traditions by the time the week is out."

I scan the parchment over and over again, my eyes repeatedly catching on the ball and whatever moon bathing is. However only one event sends true fear slicing through my body. "What is the Wild Hunt?"

"Ah," Aileen purses her lips, looking as if she wants to smile. "That's when things get especially fun for mated couples. Some people find a partner just for the night, but it's more powerful when you're bonded to the one hunting you."

"Hunting you?" I squeak.

"Yes, she wolves take off into the woods, and then their mates must hunt them down and claim them. It goes back to our origin myths, when the Moon Goddess would lead her celestial army into the forest, in pursuit of souls to create new wolves.

Nowadays "making new wolves" takes on a more literal meaning. I can't tell you how many babies are conceived on the night of the wild hunt."

"But I can't shift." I remind her nervously. Would I even have to participate? Is it required? I'm already pregnant, that must be enough to get permission to sit it out.

"That's alright. As future Luna you'll lead the way into the forest wearing a special ceremonial dress and carrying a torch. You won't be expected to shift until you're out of sight, and then Dominic will set out after you long before anyone else joins – he's the only one who will know you didn't shift."

That doesn't make me feel much better. The idea of having the entire pack watching me lead a ceremony I've never heard of before sounds more frightening than comforting, especially since it will all be a fraud!

“Did Dominic used to do this with Lydia?” I ask, not entirely sure why that thought entered my brain.

“Why, of course.” Aileen confirms. “Why do you ask?”

I shrug, “Roger told me that she was his mate first. I suppose I’m just curious about their relationship.”

Aileen gives me an appraising look, and I try not to squirm beneath her scrutiny. She sighs. “And so she was, but fated mates...

there are some forces so strong nothing can combat them.”

“You both make it sound much more loving than Dominic did.” I confess, remembering how disenchanted the Alpha had seemed with his former mate. He never described how they met or the early days, he never mentioned any love between them, only her hunger for status and power.

“It’s easy to be bitter and cynical when your heart is broken.” Aileen confides, patting my shoulder.

“Right.” I murmur, and I have to admit this makes sense. Who hasn’t been bitter in the wake of a lost love – especially when things didn’t end amicably. Is that what’s happening with Sinclair? Is his pessimistic description of his marriage simply the wounds of a broken heart making themselves known?

And what about Lydia? I can’t even fathom what it would be like to be in love with one man, then feel so uncontrollably compelled to be with another that I’d leave him, but from what everyone says, it doesn’t sound like there was any fighting it. On the other hand, I know how devastating it can be to struggle with fertility – I may not understand the mystical forces behind fated mates, but I have to have some sympathy for her on this front at least.

If I’d believed Mike was sterile and that I might have a chance with another man, would I have left him? I think about it for a long moment, but I don’t think I would, and we were far from fated. Maybe I’m biased, after all I’ve seen the damage her disloyalty did to Sinclair, especially considering that a couple of their wealth could have easily gone through IVF or adopted a child. That, more than anything else makes me wonder if Sinclair was right, that she simply wanted the most powerful man in the room. Still, if that is the case, then Roger is probably right regardless. She’ll come back when she realizes Sinclair is set to be King – and when that day comes I’ll be reduced to nothing. Is Roger right that Sinclair will go back on his word when that happens? Will I lose my baby when Lydia returns?

All of a sudden it all seems like far too much to comprehend. I'm so overwhelmed by new information, confusing feelings and strange possibilities that I feel I might burst. I decide then and there to call Cora – I need to speak to someone who isn't immersed in this crazy world. If anyone can tell me whether or not I'm losing my mind – it's my sister.

Chapter 35 – Dinner with Cora

Ella

“I swear, Cora.” I groan, burying my head in my hands. “I’m in so far over my head it’s ridiculous.”

“You’re doing fine!” Cora insists, despite the fact that she doesn’t have any idea how things are actually going. “I mean a month ago you didn’t even know this world existed.”

“How did you keep it quiet for so long?” I inquire.

“I didn’t have a choice.” Cora admits, “I didn’t even believe it at first. It took me a lot longer to come to terms with it than it took you, believe me. I mean I could see it through my microscope, I could see the molecular evidence, but...” She trails off, shaking her head about just how deep her denial had run. “I just couldn’t wrap my head around it. I always thought magic was nonsense

– it actually shook my belief in science for a minute there.”

I appreciate her consolation more than I can express. I’ve felt so alone in all this, it’s wonderful to know I’m not the only one who struggled this way. “I think it helps that I’ve been completely immersed in it.” I reason. “You have no idea how much better I feel just being out with you – away from all that. I mean honestly, it feels as though I’ve been living underwater or something. Like I’m learning how to survive without air because there’s no other option, and I don’t even realize how odd it is until I surface again and remember what breathing is.” I explain. “Not to mention Sinclair. He’s confusing me so much. It’s like I’m a teenager again and he’s my first crush.”

“Maybe it’s just the baby,” Cora suggests, “it wants to be near him.”

“I suppose.” I concede, “but I still don’t understand how any of this is possible. I mean the shifters are one thing – but how can I be pregnant by one?”

“I don’t know.” Cora sighs, “I mean their society has always been hidden for their own protection. A few humans like me are allowed to know, and I expect a few have fallen in love at some point or another, but I’ve never heard of anyone cross breeding.

It shouldn’t be possible.” She shakes her head. “Your baby really is a miracle, Elle.”

“Don’t I know it.” I grin. “I have to focus on that. I have to focus on the baby, rather than him.”

“Is it really that bad?” Cora presses.

“Yeah, I feel like I’m losing it, and I can’t figure out if he reciprocates the feelings, or if it’s all in my head. And then there’s all this stuff with his former mate. It’s all such a mess.”

“Do you trust him?” Cora probes gently, squeezing my hand across the table.

I feel like there’s a rock sitting in the bottom of my stomach as I consider this question. “I made the mistake of trusting one man –

after everything that happened to us when we were growing up, I actually fell for Mike’s lies. I knew better and I let my guard down. I’ll never forgive myself for putting myself in that situation, and it’s not a mistake I plan on making again.”

Cora looks at me with so much undiluted pity that I pull my hand away. “Please don’t look at me that way.”

“Mike wasn’t your fault, Ella.” She declares firmly. “Mike was Mike’s fault.”

“It takes two to pull off a con.” I remind her, “It can’t succeed without an easy mark – and that’s obviously what I was. I’m at least partly responsible for not seeing through his bullshit. There were red flags and I just buried my head in the sand rather than confront them.”

She’s shaking her head determinedly, “You know, the older we get, the more I realize just how much you shielded me from when we were kids. You let yourself be hurt so that I and the other little ones wouldn’t be, and now you carry the weight of that trauma while we get off scot free. It isn’t fair. And I hate to see you blaming yourself this way when none of it has been your fault.”

I stare intently at my surrogate sister, feeling a rush of warmth for her. “You know I wouldn’t change that for the world, Cora. I would so much rather suffer myself, than let you be harmed, than fail to protect you.”

“That’s why you’re going to make such a wonderful mother.” She smiles tenderly.

“I just hope this baby is safe.” I relate. “The campaign ends just before I’m due, and once Sinclair is King I’ll be able to relax. But I’m terrified of him losing. If the Prince wins I really think he might come after my baby... maybe it and Sinclair both.”

“I can’t imagine anyone being strong enough to lay a hand on Sinclair.” Cora observes doubtfully.

“On their own maybe not.” I agree, “but with an army behind him?”

“Then you’ll just have to make sure he wins.” Cora encourages. “The word around the

office is that you've already made an incredible splash."

"Yeah, so much of one that I can barely go anywhere without camera crews following me around everywhere I go." I complain.

"Well it definitely sounds like you need a night off." Cora declared mischievously. "We should go out! Just the two of us – before your whole life gets consumed by the holidays."

"I'd love to," I sigh, "but if we want to go out without an entire entourage we'll have to be sneaky about it."

She arches her brows. "Sinclair is being that overprotective?"

"Yes and it's driving me crazy. I mean about eleven different people have explained to me about male wolves with a breeding mate. I guess the pup is enough and I understand the prince might want to take him out of the running – but it's not like anything has even happened to make him worry!" I exclaim.

"I suppose it's better to be safe than sorry." Corry counters.

"True – so we'll just have to be extra safe when we go out." I decide. "In fact, we won't go anywhere near the shifter neighborhoods – human world only. I need some more time with my head above water."

The next afternoon I'm patiently allowing Sinclair to take my blood pressure, despite the fact that I'm perfectly capable of doing it myself. I'm trying to keep my thoughts neutral as the cuff begins to inflate, but it's hard to ignore the Alpha's laser focus on my features.

"I know what you're thinking." He smirks after a moment.

"Do you?" I quip.

"I know you can do this yourself." He grins, "but I like doing it for you and I've been so busy that last few days that this is one of the only times I get to spend with you and the pup."

Sure, I think wryly, other than when he's scent marking me every morning and night.

"Why have you been so busy?"

"Just the campaign, and the holidays. It's the craziest time of year." Sinclair explains,

frowning at the reading on the little screen.

“Your pressure is still too high.”

“Have you ever considered that you might be what’s stressing me out?” I suggest, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Sinclair gives me an appraising look, before reaching up to stroke my cheek. “Hmm, your heart does speed up when I touch you.

Why might that be?”

“As I said, stress.” I supply, instantly regretting the direction of this conversation.

“Uh-huh.” He rumbles, still petting me in the most infuriating way.

“Not to mention all this festival business.” I admit, eager to change the subject.

“What worries you about it?” He inquires, taking the bait.

“It’s seven days straight in the public eye, under intense scrutiny when I don’t know the first thing about the Solstice – beyond what Aileen told me.” I share.

“Ella, look at me.” He encourages, waiting for me to obey before continuing. “I promise you, I’ll help you through it.”

“You said that about the campaign dinner.” I remind him.

“I know, but I won’t let you down again, I’ll stay with you the whole time.”

“Okay, but if you don’t -” I begin to object.

“If I don’t I will grovel at your feet and grant you anything your little heart desires.” Sinclair vows, cutting me off.

“Anything?” I repeat, intrigued.

“Yes, but don’t you even think about sneaking away so that I’ll owe you.” He forbids, offering me a wolfish grin.

“Now there’s an idea!” I remark deviously.

Sinclair throws his head back and laughs. “Good Goddess, I’m not going to have to chain you to my wrist am I?”

I shrug, playfully batting my lashes. "I can pick a lock."

He laughs again, and I'm filled with warmth. Shaking his head, he presses a swift kiss to my forehead before standing. "No plotting. Focus on relaxing. I'll be home very late tonight, so don't wait up." He informs me, putting away the machine. "I'll see you in the morning."

I wait until he drives away before calling Cora. We'd agreed to go out the next time Sinclair stayed out late, and I'm not going to miss out on this chance. She picks up the phone promptly, and I'm smiling widely as I tell her the good news, "Cora – we're on."

Chapter 36 – Night Out

Ella

“Cora, this is exactly what I needed!” I exclaim, raising my voice over the pounding music. “When was the last time we went out just for the fun of it?”

“I can’t even remember!” She shouts back, beaming as multi-colored strobe lights flash over her lovely features. “When was the last time you weren’t working or stuck taking care of that prick, Mike!?”

I don’t need to know the exact date to know it’s been ages – we haven’t had the freedom or money to go out in years, not that it had been much of an option beforehand. Cora always offered to pay my way of course, but I never felt comfortable accepting money from her, not to mention Mike would have accused me of trying to meet another man. Looking at my sister now, dancing without a care to the thumping bass, I’m transported back to the first night we ever snuck into a club.

We were fifteen years old, and it was our second summer living in the streets rather than suffering at the orphanage. We couldn’t survive the elements in the fall and winter, so we always ended up going back – but these summers were quickly becoming our escape from all the troubles of the broken system, and this night was our first foray into the world of grown up night life.

We befriended the bartender, convincing him we were much older than our true age and bribing him with the little money we could spare from our jobs at a local daycare center. He let us in without complaint, even offering us our first drink for free. It was the first taste of alcohol we’d ever consumed, and the only amount we’d consume that night. We were determined to save our money so we could afford an apartment together one day – even if that meant sleeping in cardboard boxes in the park, or crashing on the floor of the daycare center in the meantime.

“This is amazing!” I cried, dancing without any inhibitions, raising my arms over my head as I swayed to the hypnotic beat.

“I never knew it could be so fun!” Cora replied happily. “Why isn’t dancing around in the dark at home this great?”

“Because we’re not allowed to have music,” I laugh, “or do anything even remotely resembling fun!”

“We should come back some time!” She suggests, obviously trying to figure out when we might be able to spend money again.

We both know it should be a special occasion, so I throw out, “The last night of summer!

Before we go back to the orphanage!"

The memory shifts before I can stop it, sweeping me off to the night we'd agreed on during that first outing, to the last night of summer. The evening had started out precisely the same way, with us changing in the children's restroom at work, trying our best to look grown up, and bribing our way in through the back door. It soon dissolved into a hazy fog of revelry, where Cora and I spiraled into the dizzying lights and deafening music.

It was all wonderful until an aggressive man twice my age took me by the hand and began grinding his body against mine, gripping me so tightly I couldn't escape his hold no matter how hard I struggled. He pulled me away from Cora from the start, but I didn't truly panic until he began dragging me towards the bathroom. The music was so loud that no one could hear me crying out for help. I wriggled and fought with all my might, but it wasn't until Cora flagged down one of the bouncers to come and pry the horrible man off me that I finally escaped.

It had been a close call, but one which was bound to raise other ghosts from the depths of my past – specters I have no intention of resurrecting now. I reach for Cora, determined not to continue down the path into my shattered memories, "I need some air!" I shout.

She's been dancing with a handsome man who hit on her at the bar, looking as though she's having the time of her life. Still, she takes one look at my face, and her own crumples with concern. "I'll come with you!"

"No," I wave her off, "You stay and have fun, I'll be back soon!"

I stalk out into the snow, not bothering to retrieve my coat from the coat check. The bracing cold is an utter relief after the writhing heat of the dance floor, and though I chafe my arms against the chill, I welcome the brisk air filling my lungs.

I hate it when this happens, when I've been doing so well staying in the present – and then my waking nightmares rise up at the most inopportune moments. I drag a hand through my hair, trying to clear my mind, to get myself back to that happy haze of a little while ago. I haven't wished for a drink since I was inseminated, but I wish I could have one now – just to help me escape, if only for a moment.

As I stand in the cold, contemplating how long is too long to spend out here and distractedly wondering why I never seem to feel the elements the way others do – the sound of clinking glass shatters the silence. I whip around, startling at the sudden sound.

I'm out behind the club, where there shouldn't be anyone else present except perhaps a raccoon raiding the dumpster.

Yet as I watch, four shadowy figures emerge from the darkness. I know they're shifters the moment I lay eyes on them – though I'm not sure how. Each one of the rough, ragged looking men is twice my size, and I immediately turn for the door to the club. I yank on the handle, once twice, then over and over again when it doesn't open. It must be locked!

Annoyance wells up inside me – despite the morbid turn of my thoughts, this night had been the break I needed from my new, surreal reality. Since we came out I haven't thought about wolves, shifters, Sinclair or the campaign even once. I finally felt like I was clearing my mind of all the chaos, but now that's all gone to hell. I can't very well ignore this.

"What do you want?" I demand, trying to sound braver than I feel. "If it's money, I'll give it to you, but you should know Alpha Dominic is my mate."

The man nearest me laughs, a cruel, humorless sound. "You think we don't know that?" He scoffs.

"That's why we're here." The second shifter states, as if this should be obvious."

"Then you also know I'm pregnant." I add, praying that this might provoke some semblance of mercy from them. They simply laugh again, and I add, "if you lay a hand on me, he'll kill you." I threaten, sensing in my heart that this is true, even though he's never told me any such thing.

"That assumes he can find us." The first man, clearly their leader, proclaims.

"And trust me, he won't." His side-kick contributes.

"Who sent you?" I scramble for any lifeline to help myself, to delay them long enough for me to find a way to escape. I'm scanning the alley behind them, but they're blocking every possible exit. "What are they paying you? I'll double the fee whatever it is."

The man scoffs, "We're not here for money, you dumb bitch."

"Then what?" I demand, "a cause?"

The first shifter lashes out so quickly and suddenly I don't even see him moving. He backhands me across the face, his knuckles exploding against my cheekbone with a violent crack. I tumble to the ground, even as he looms above me. "Shut the fuck up."

The coppery tang of blood fills my mouth, and I spit the viscous, crimson liquid into the snow. The world is spinning around me.

When I look up at my attackers, they seem to multiply, looking like eight men instead of four. I'm sure they expect me to whimper and plead with him, but if this is going to be the end of me, I refuse to play into his hands. I would gladly plead for the life of my baby, if I thought it might help, but I know better than to think these men will do anything other than use that pain and fear against me. They're the type that will play on any weakness you expose just to humiliate you.

I glare up at the leader, meeting his expectant smirk with a snark. "You're not the first man who's struck me." I inform him icily,

"and if you want to break me you're going to have to do better than that." I continue, taking only the mildest pleasure in their surprise. "You should be ashamed, I've known little boys with a stronger swing." It's a bold face lie, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

"Is that so?" He kneels down, taking my chin in his hand. "I see why the Alpha likes her." He leers, "Shall we see what other charms she's hiding?"

Chapter 37 – Roger To the Rescue

Ella

For all my bravado, my attacker's words fill me with dread. The implications are clear, and panic is bubbling up inside me. No, no, no. I think desperately, hating myself for provoking them. If I'd kept my mouth shut would they have just killed me? Did I bring this upon myself? I open my mouth to scream as he reaches toward me, pure malice glittering in his dark eyes, but before I can make a sound, a voice rings out behind the wolves.

"Take your hands off her!" Roger appears out of nowhere, and for a moment I'm sure I'm hallucinating. Where did he come from?

He charges forward, and I watch in horror and fascination as the clothes explode off his body in shreds and his sinewy muscles vibrate and pulse with energy. Before my very eyes he transforms, bursting forth in a whirlwind of fur, fangs and claws. Where Roger stood a moment before, now there is only a huge gray wolf.

Before I know it the other men have shifted too. Three are gray like Roger, but the first man -the largest and fiercest – has red fur like a fox. Of course I've never seen such a terrifying fox. My mind is reeling – have I ever been this near a wolf? Have I ever even seen one in the wild? I don't even know why I'm focusing on such things – it's not like it matters, these aren't actual wolves.

They're shifters, and the beasts are at least twice the size of true wolves.

My arms are wrapped around my middle, desperately trying to protect my unborn child from the beings in front of me. I'm suddenly painfully aware of how flimsy my human body is next to theirs, and while my baby might be stronger, it's far too little to survive if anything were to happen to me.

I can barely keep track of what's happening, my mind is fractured between primal fear, amazement as I try to process these incredible sights, and anxiety as I attempt to keep up with the unfolding events. The wolves are circling one another, growling and snarling, baring their fangs as their raised hackles and flattened ears reshape their fluffy coats. As ever, my mind finds humor at the most inappropriate of times, and I have to smother a smile as I imagine these shifters' responses to being described as fluffy.

Stop it, Ella! Shaking myself, I push my body up against the wall, trying to flatten myself to the bricks lest one of the enraged creatures comes too close. At first I think they'll continue stalking around each other, posturing forever, but then Roger lunges out of nowhere, and the fight begins.

My human eyes can't keep up with their supernatural speed. All I see is a tornado of limbs,

punctuated by the snapping of fangs and yelps of pain. As they attack one another I try to open the door again, then visually carve out a path past them to the mouth of the alley. Unfortunately their battle is so chaotic that I don't think I'll be able to run past them without falling into the middle of the fray. I just have to pray the Roger is strong enough to defeat his assailants.

In the end it's over relatively quickly, amazingly fast actually – given that it was four against one. Roger might not be as strong as Sinclair, but he's clearly much more powerful than this lot. He seizes the leader by the throat, shaking him like a rag doll and sending the others running for safety. Can it really be that simple? I wonder, cut the head off the snake and the body dies? What cowards.

Roger throws the other wolf to the ground – scarlet blood dripping over the snow as he clambers to his feet and scampers off into the night, whimpering like a pup. I'm still standing there frozen when Roger shifts back, coming forward with outstretched hands, as if I'm a wild animal he's trying to calm. "Ella, are you still with me?" He broaches gently.

"I... what just happened?" I gasp. I can feel the tendrils of shock beginning to take hold, wrapping around me with numbing relief.

Yet for some reason my body is fighting the reaction, as if it doesn't think the threat has passed and needs to remain in fight or flight mode. "How did you know I was here? How did you know I was in danger? Who were those men?"

The questions are pouring out of me now, and I'm not sure I can make them stop. I need answers before I can relax, before I can start to process these events.

"I'll explain everything." Roger promises, "first just tell me if you're alright."

"I'm fine." I insist, still protectively clutching my belly.

"You're bleeding." He observes, reaching towards me.

I flinch away from his touch, and trembles rack my body. Between the flashback of my near-assault and this very real attempt, the idea of any man touching me makes me feel sick to my stomach. Even as I think this, I feel my gorge rising, and turn away to vomit. Tears burn in my eyes as my stomach heaves, and I can only be grateful my hair is up. "I need Cora." I tell Roger. "My sister, she's inside."

He looks uncertain. "I don't want to leave you like this Ella."

I shake my head stubbornly. "I need Cora." I need a woman, I'm coming to pieces, and no man will be able to comfort me right now. I wouldn't normally place such a burden on

my sister, but I'm afraid this scene is going to be quickly overrun with aggressive shifters, and I don't think I can handle it.

He races out of the alley, no doubt circling the block to make it back to the club entrance. I move away from my quickly freezing sick, and lower myself to the ground in the snow, Wrapping my arms around my knees. A minute later the back door slams open, making me jump five feet in the air. Then Cora is there, dropping to her knees in front of me. "Oh my God, Ella!" She frets, her hands fluttering around me as if she's not sure what to do first, "What happened, are you okay?"

Tears well on my lashes as I look up at her. "I want to go home." I murmur, my lower lip quivering. "Can you call us a cab?"

"Sweetheart of course," she wraps one slender arm around me, then pulls out her phone.

However, before she can dial the number, the device begins to buzz in her hand, and Sinclair's name flashes across the screen.

We both freeze, and I shake my head. "Don't, don't pick up."

Roger nods in agreement, "You'll only get her in more trouble."

But Cora is frowning at my bruised face and split lip, "Honey he's going to find out anyway, and he'll be less angry if he hears sooner rather than later." Before I can stop her, she picks up the phone. I can hear Sinclair's deep tones through the receiver, and then Cora is nodding. "I'm with her. But listen, something has happened."

I clench my eyes shut as the call continues, listening as she calmly shares our location and he promises to come as fast as he can. When she hangs up she looks back down at me, "It'll be okay, Ella." She chafes my bare arms with her hands, "We should really get you up out of the snow."

I get to my feet in something of a trance, hating that I'm worrying her. I bite back my fraying emotions, swiping at my tears. "I'm okay." I say again, "it's just a little bruise."

"Come on, let's go inside." Cora suggests.

"No!" I argue, backing away from the concerned pair. "It's too many people."

"Okay." Cora agrees easily, clearly not sure how to help me.

Trying to keep up a brave front, I turn back to Roger, "Tell me what just happened."

“They were rogues.” He explains, “wolves without allegiance to any pack – if they’re not robbing and raping,” I flinch violently at the word, and he softens his tone, “in the neutral borderlands between territories, they’re working as mercenaries. My guess is that’s what these four were.”

“They knew who I was.” I gulp. “They knew I was here. No one but Cora knew that.”

Roger shakes his head, “They probably followed you from home.”

“But why?” Cora inquires, looking so upset now that I feel compelled to comfort her. It’s a much more comfortable dynamic for me, and I readily squeeze her hand.

“Why else?” Roger scoffs, “The campaign. Your pup – this isn’t even the first rogue attack in Moon Valley this week.”

“It isn’t?” I clarify.

“Dominic didn’t tell you?” He sounds as though he’s trying and failing to sound neutral.

I shake my head, zeroing in on the detail that has me hovering so close to my sister, refusing to lower my guard. “None of this answers how you knew I was here.”

“I didn’t.” Roger shares sadly. “When I left the house tonight I caught the scent of the rogues, and I followed it here – afraid there was going to be another attack. I had no idea you were their target.” He glances at the mouth of the alley, scenting the air. “Brace yourself now, Dominic is close.”

Chapter 38 – Aftermath

Sinclair

When I reach the address Cora supplied, it's all I can do to keep my temper in check. She hadn't explained what happened, only that she and Ella needed to be picked up from a nightclub. I was able to stay calm while I got the details from her, but I found my anger growing exponentially the closer I drew to my disobedient little human. After everything that happened when she snuck out to see my father, I can't believe she defied me again. However as soon as I round the corner of the alley behind the venue, my fury evaporates.

I'm not even sure of what I'm seeing at first. Roger is standing near the back door, naked, disheveled and bruised. The scent of strange wolves reeks to high heaven, and blood is splattered over the ground leading away from the club, along with numerous large pawprints. Cora is standing between me and Ella, her taller frame shielding my pup's mother from view. She looks unharmed but a bit shaken, dressed in a tight red frock.

Roger stiffens at the sight of me, and Cora turns to face me, finally revealing Ella. Her arms are wrapped around her body, and she's wearing a glittery black mini dress and heels. She's staring at the ground, her energy agitated and withdrawn at once.

There's a huge black and blue bruise on her high cheekbone, and a cut on her lip, dried blood congealed around the wound.

I rush forward, surprised when Cora intercepts me, a pleading expression on her face. "Please be gentle – she's in shock."

I immediately skirt around her, reaching for Ella. Roger and Cora both raise their hands to stop me, "No!" It's as if they think my touch might frighten Ella, but as soon as our bodies connect the tension seeps out of Ella like a dam bursting. She comes to me instinctively, letting me gather her to my chest and nestling close to my body. Her small hands cling to my shirt as her nose presses to my chest, breathing in my scent.

Roger and Cora look on with confusion, and I wonder if Ella had been afraid of their touch. The obvious implications of why she would feel that way pour over me, and I hold her tighter. "What happened?" I ask, glaring at Roger. If it weren't for Ella's obvious need of comfort, I might have already attacked him. Seeing any man this close to her when she's injured was a violent trigger.

"Rogues." Roger answers simply. "I caught their scent near my house and followed them. When I arrived they had Ella cornered."

They were talking about..." He trails off, glancing nervously at the woman in my arms.

“They were sent to kill her, but they obviously wanted to have a bit of fun with her first.”

I can't hold back the growl which tears through my chest, and I'm not sure what enrages me more – the fact that anyone wanted to hurt Ella, the way she trembles at Roger's description, or the fact that he brought up their intentions in front of her. Ella burrows closer to me, and I wrap my coat around her shivering body, buttoning it around the small of her back so we're both snug inside. “I fought them off and they ran for it.” Roger continues. “But she was already hurt before I arrived... it didn't look like they did anything, but I don't know.”

Leaning my lips to Ella's ear, I can't help the ragged huskiness of my voice. My wolf is going berserk in my head, and I want nothing more than to hunt down the men responsible and rip them to shreds. “Did they touch you?” I demand, stroking her hair.

She shakes her head against my chest, and I catch the sound of a hiccup – as if she's holding back sobs. She still won't look at me, and I realize she's probably afraid she's in trouble even though she needs my comfort.

“I think one of them hit her.” Cora supplies, no doubt referring to her sister's battered face. “But she wouldn't really talk about it.”

She just kept saying she's fine and she wanted to go home.” I can picture it as if I was there, and I feel a rush of warmth knowing Ella sought me for safety when she shied away from the others.

Cora frowns, continuing. “I don't even know how they found her. We were inside dancing and then... I don't know, I think she got overheated or something and came outside. But... it's like they were waiting for her.”

I nod, “However it happened, it sounds like we both owe Roger our thanks.” I hate saying these words, and I find all of these circumstances incredibly suspicious. Cora has hit the nail on the head, and the red flags are only compounded by the fact that my brother managed to find Ella just in time to leap to her rescue. Still, I don't want to let him on to my suspicions. If it happens the way he says, then I do owe him my thanks, and if it didn't, I need to play my cards close to my chest in order to uncover the truth. “Brother, can you escort Cora home?”

Cora looks very reluctant to leave Ella, but eventually she departs with Roger, giving me another imploring look as they walk away. If I had to guess I'd presume she's asking me not to be too harsh with her sister, but she needn't be worried. I have no intention of scolding or punishing Ella – not tonight at least.

“Come on little one.” I encourage, unbuttoning my coat and scooping her up. She slides her arms around my neck and leans her uninjured cheek against my shoulder, still as

quiet as a mouse. The car ride home passes much the same way, and when we reach the mansion I take her straight upstairs to my bathroom.

Setting her on the counter, I rummage through the cabinets for a first aid kit. Ella leans back against the mirror, her face devoid of all emotion. "Come here, let me look at you." I instruct when I've retrieved the proper supplies.

Catching Ella's face between my hands, I tilt her head from right to left, studying her injuries and trying to stay calm. The bruise on her cheek is swelling quickly, it's bright red center showing just how close the blow came to breaking her skin. The cut on her lip seems minor, but the amount of dried blood makes me worry it's deeper than it looks.

I wet a washcloth and begin cleaning the cut, causing Ella hiss and wince, "I'm sorry, sweetheart." I croon. "It has to be done."

Ella snuffles and clamps her eyes shut as I continue working, determined to suffer through it without complaint. Of course, when I switch out the water for alcohol, she practically leaps off the counter, whimpering so pitifully my heart aches. "Shh baby, I know.

I'm almost done." I promise, holding her tightly in place.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" I ask a little later, pressing a cloth wrapped ice pack to her cheek. She flinches, but replaces my hand with her own, keeping up the cool pressure.

"They already told you." She murmurs, silently submitting as I strip off her dress to check for other injuries.

I'm relieved not to find any other wounds, and when I press my hand to her belly the pup seems perfectly well. It's heartbeat is steady and strong, and though I sense earlier flashes of unease – no doubt caused by Jane's fear – it now seems relieved to be safely home with us both. "I want to hear it from you." I press gently. "Roger and Cora don't know what happened when you were alone with them."

Ella blinks up at me, and I'm surprised by the lack of emotion on her lovely face. "It was nothing. I went outside for some air.

Then I heard movement in the alley and they appeared. I tried to go back in but the door was locked -"

"It was locked?" I question, more sharply than I intended.

"Yes, but it was probably just an automatic door." She reasons. "Anyway I offered them

money, I told them I was your mate and you'd kill them if you harmed me, then one hit me... and I made the mistake of provoking him..." She trails off. "Roger turned up soon after that."

"Provoked him how?" I ask, pleased that she's talking but not liking the hollow look in her eyes, or emptiness in her words.

Ella stares at her lap, "it's not important, he probably planned on... raping me even before that."

Sighing, I pull her into my arms, "I'm sure he did." I confirm, knowing how strange a comfort this must seem. Still, Ella clearly knows exactly what they intended, and I'd rather her understand that she didn't cause them to think that way, than deny that the danger was always present.

"You really don't have to fuss over me this way." Ella says after a moment of cuddling. "I'm fine."

"You don't have to be fine, Ella." I inform her sternly.

She squirms in my hold, and I reluctantly release her. I'm not sure what I expected her to say, but her next question takes me by surprise. "Why didn't you tell me about the other rogue attacks?"

Chapter 39 – The Truth Comes Out

Ella

I can't explain it, but for some reason Sinclair's tender care upsets me more than if he was angry. It's taken me a while to come back to myself –as the fog of my shock wore off and the utter safety and security of being with Sinclair thawed my frozen senses, I found my emotions slowly returning. Just not the ones I expected.

Do I want him to be angry? I wonder. Why? Because it somehow hurts me that he doesn't seem to care that I defied him?

Because I feel badly for breaking his rules and want to see that they weren't all for show? Because I'm so angry with myself for what happened tonight, and I feel like I deserve to be punished?

I don't have the answers to these questions, though on some level I suspect all my theories have a kernel of truth. Either way, I find myself picking an argument, rather than letting him comfort me.

Sinclair sighs, though he still doesn't release me entirely. "I didn't want to worry you." He explains, his handsome features a hard mask. "There's only been one so far, and you know I've been worried about your stress levels."

"Is that why you were called away the other day?" I inquire, his sudden disappearance from the kitchen making more sense now.

"Yes." He confirms, "It was horrible honestly. Almost a dozen dead in broad daylight and twice as many injured. They didn't smell like the same wolves who were in the alley with you tonight, but I'm sure they were hired by the same person."

"The prince?" I guess, shifting my hold on the ice pack as my fingers gradually go numb.

"That's right." Sinclair nods. "I've been searching for them ever since, but I think he's probably protecting them."

"Will you search for the ones who came after me tonight?" I murmur, not understanding the sudden bloodlust I feel. It must be my maternal instincts responding to the threat against my pup – I've never wished anyone dead before, no matter what they've done to me, but I want nothing more than for Sinclair to destroy those cruel wolves.

Sinclair nods. "I will hunt them down and tear them to absolute pieces." He snarls, letting out more of his wolf than I think he intended.

I'm amazed to realize I'm smiling about such a macabre idea. Frankly I'm amazed I can

smile about anything so soon after the attack, even if it is a somber grin. Either way the stretch of my lips pulls on my cut, and soon my smile is a grimace of pain. “Ow, ow, ow.”

Sinclair tsks, “poor, vicious, darling.” He croons, resting his forehead against mine and petting my sides.

“Is it terrible that I wish them harm?” I whisper, gazing into his green eyes, mere inches from mine.

“Of course not.” Sinclair promises, smiling himself now, “you really are becoming more like a wolf every day.”

A painful pang blooms in my chest. He seems so pleased every time I do something he considers wolfish. It might just be that he’s happy the pup is growing, but it really feels like he doesn’t approve of my humanity – as if he wants me to be a wolf and will take any scraps of behavior he can get. I’m getting lost in my thoughts now, but Sinclair soon pulls my focus back to him.

Framing my face in his hands but careful to avoid touching my bruise, he prompts, “Would you like to tell me why you snuck out tonight – after everything we went through the other day?”

I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, “Am I in a lot of trouble?”

“Just answer the question, Ella.” He admonishes. Part of me wishes he’d tell me I am in trouble – if I am it means he hasn’t given up on me. But it worries me when he goes stoic and unreadable. His anger I can handle, his grim contemplation makes me fear he might decide I’m not worth the hassle and void our deal – taking the baby from me.

“I just needed a night away from all this.” I share, gesturing to our surroundings. “I needed to feel human again, just for a little while. And I thought it would be fine since we were sticking to human territories and businesses. I didn’t know about the other attack.”

“Ella, the other attack isn’t what matters.” Sinclair rumbles sternly, pulling my distracted thoughts back to the present. “I told you it was dangerous for you to be out without guards, you promised me you wouldn’t do this again and you broke your word at the very first opportunity.” I can see his temper flaring now, flashing in his eyes as we finally address the events which led up to the attack. “What were you thinking? After everything I’ve told you about the Prince, after everything you’ve learned is at stake in this campaign.”

“But it’s your campaign, not mine.” I argue. “And I’ve turned my entire life upside down, given up my entire identity to support it.”

At the very least I think I deserve a night to myself.”

“I will gladly give you a night to yourself.” Sinclair agreed, “but if you’re going to be out in the city, you need protection!”

“I don’t want to have to ask permission just to set one foot out the front door!” I burst out. “I shouldn’t have to have babysitters just to go to the park or the grocery store. I don’t know how anyone can live with those kinds of restraints, Dominic.”

“I understand better than you think, Ella.” Dominic confesses, “I don’t like having to drag around half a dozen people with me either, but it’s a necessary evil. Just think about the baby, if not for yourself, please take these precautions for the pup.”

I push down off the counter, shaking my head as I stride past him. “I don’t think you realize just how much you’re asking of me –

or how difficult this is. A month ago I led a completely different existence and now everything has changed and everything I thought I knew – was wrong. The only thing I have left is my independence, and now you’re demanding that too!”

“I don’t want to take your independence, or your freedom, Ella.” Sinclair insists, “And I know this isn’t how you wanted to have your baby – but it isn’t exactly what I wanted either. I always imagined I would share the experience with my mate and that we’d be a family forever. I never imagined contracts and custody and fake relationships.” Ouch. It’s completely true, and yet the statement cuts me to the core. “So we can make the best of our situation, or we can let it divide us. Now, I for one, think we should be a team. I want our baby to have two loving, united parents, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.” I murmur, tears springing to my eyes. I need to get out of here before I start to cry. “And I think we’ll get there.

But right now I just need some time to myself. I’m going to sleep in my rooms tonight.”

I turn to leave, but Sinclair’s deep voice stops me. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

I pause, turning back in bafflement, “Why not?”

“You’ve had a traumatic experience, you might have nightmares.” He reasons.

I roll my eyes, turning back to the door. “I’ve had traumatic experiences before and I’ve always gotten myself through them just fine – nightmares or not.”

“I understand that, but you don’t have to get through it alone anymore.” Sinclair counters, his footsteps sounding behind me.

“And I understand that you might not want to let the pup out of your sight after the attack, but if you want me to avoid stress, then I need some space to process this.” I reply, trying to empathize with his perspective.

I can practically hear him grappling for another excuse, before he finally gives up the pretense and commands. “Ella, I’m sorry, but I can’t allow that.”

“Excuse me?” I scoff, turning to face him.

He’s standing a few feet away, clenching and unclenching his fists as the muscle in his jaw twitches with agitation. Something about his behavior makes me think this has nothing to do with my potential nightmares, or his own possessive instincts. I have the distinct intuition that he’s keeping something from me – like the first rogue attack.

Narrowing my eyes, I sidle forehead, feeling an inexplicable wave of intuition that not all is as it seems. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“What do you mean?” Sinclair questions impassively.

“I mean that you were already in a security frenzy before there was ever a rogue attack, and unless you’re a complete tyrant and just determined to control me, all these precautions must mean you have another reason to be afraid. I don’t think you’re a tyrant

– despite your spot on impression at times – so what aren’t you telling me?” Now that I see it, it seems so obvious. I don’t know how I missed it before.

“Fine,” He sighs, looking as though he’s about to deliver my death sentence. “I’m sorry, Ella, but there really was someone in your rooms the other night.”

Chapter 40 – Intruder

Ella

“What?” I squeak, my voice catching in my throat. The moment the words left Sinclair’s mouth I felt my blood run cold, and now I feel as though I might topple over with the shock of it. I must have misheard him, surely he doesn’ mean what I think he does.

“That night you heard someone growling in your bathroom?” Sinclair explains, stepping forward as though he wants to reach for me, but stopping himself short when I flinch away. “I told you I didn’t smell anything... but I lied. There was someone in your rooms, I just didn’t want to scare you.”

“And you let me go back there, knowing there’d been an intruder?” I demand, indignation swirling to life amidst my fear, surprise and sorrow.

“Sweetheart, I had the guards do a thorough search of the grounds then and there. They were long gone, and I’ve had you sleeping in my rooms ever since. I also increased the guards during the day when I knew you’d be back there.” He shares. “Trust me, I’ve done everything possible to ensure your safety.”

“Except tell me that I was in danger!” I cry. “It’s no wonder you flipped out the way you did when I went to see your father! And you blamed me like I was supposed to know about the threat!”

“Ella –” He begins in a placating tone.

“No!” I cut him off, stomping my foot out of pure wrath. “How am I supposed to know it’s dangerous if you don’t tell me, Dominic?”

I exclaim. “You didn’t even tell me about the rogue attack and that had nothing to do with me! All this time I thought you were being overbearing and overprotective, but I just didn’t have a clue what was happening in my own life!” Too late I realize my earlier desire to leave before I start crying is now a lost cause. Tears are sliding down my cheeks as I continue. “How could you do that! You know what I went through with Mike. I spent years thinking I knew my situation when it was all lies – and you turned around and did the exact same thing!”

Dominic’s usually golden skin goes very pale, “Goddess Ella, I never even thought about it that way.” He admits. “I was just trying to protect you and the pup. I didn’t want you to be afraid.”

“Well all you actually did was make a fool of me.” I inform him stiffly. “And for the record, you also made me more vulnerable to danger. Do you think I would have ever considered sneaking away without guards if I knew someone might actually be after

me?! Do you believe I would ever risk my baby that way?"

"Ella, I'm sorry." Sinclair professes, and I'm amazed to see how earnest he looks. Gone is the bossy Alpha who orders everyone about and lays down the law when they defy him, replaced by a man who has been truly humbled. "I'm truly, truly sorry. I was inconsiderate and patronizing – I assumed I knew what was best and never consulted you... I've been a hypocrite, I've been going on about being a team but I've been acting like a tyrant." He continues. "You were right, and that's not the kind of parent I want to be."

Despite my simmering anger, I'm completely agog. I never expected a man as powerful as Sinclair to admit a mistake – or any fault for that matter. I thoroughly believed that people of his ilk never took responsibility for their actions, because they have the privilege of passing it off onto someone else. Even men without means, like Mike, often can't admit when they're wrong. In fact, as a woman, the number of times I've heard any man tell me that I'm right in a disagreement is... well, I think this is the first time.

"Can you ever forgive me?" Sinclair is still going, coming forward to brush the hair back from my face, and looking deep into my eyes.

I cross my arms over my chest, tilting my chin up and giving him a haughty sniff to hide my amazement. "As long as you promise never to do it again."

"I promise that I'll try to do better." Sinclair vows, taking hold of my arms. "I'm still an Alpha, and hopefully a King. It's in my nature to protect at all costs, and those instincts are strongest when it comes to she-wolves and pups. When I think about you in danger my wolf fairly loses his mind, and I really am concerned about this pregnancy. You're high risk as a human, and the longer your blood pressure stays elevated, the more likely you are to become high risk in shifter terms too."

His words send a frisson of fear through my nerves. I've been trying to tell myself all this worry is his overprotectiveness gone mad, but when he puts it in these terms I realize my baby and I might have a harder road ahead of us than I realized. I hadn't considered myself high risk simply because I'm a human carrying a shifter pup, but it makes sense. Again I recall the doctor's warnings about the size of the fetus, the spotting incident and now my persistent stress. I really don't mind if I suffer, but the idea of my baby being at risk is enough to bowl me over.

"So I can't say for certain that I'll never slip up again," Sinclair forges ahead, massaging my arms with the pads of his thumbs,

"but I promise to always consider your perspective, and consult you whenever I can."

"Thank you." I murmur, leaning into his warmth.

He nods and kisses the top of my head, wrapping his strong arms around me. “Do you still want to sleep in your rooms?”

“Would you let me?” I inquire, already testing his resolve.

Sinclair offers me a wolfish grin. “As long as you let me post enough guards at the door.”

I chuckle, and shake my head. “I want to stay with you.”

His muscles untense slightly, and he purrs in contentment. “Good. It’s been a very long night.”

“You can say that again.” I agree, wriggling out of his hold so I can retrieve a night dress from my designated drawer in his dresser.

A little while later we’re curled beneath the plush covers of his king sized bed. Sinclair always sleeps shirtless— not that I’m complaining – so he’s stretched out on his back as I rest my uninjured cheek on his bare pec, immediately soothed by his intoxicating scent. I once asked him why I find smelling him so soothing, and he explained that it’s just the pup. Still I can’t help thinking that I would have loved his scent even if I weren’t ‘breeding’ as he calls it.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Sinclair asks, tracing his fingers in soothing patterns down my back. “After the attack, I mean.”

I nod, brushing my cheek over the fine hairs of his chest and landing myself with a tickle in my nose. “It was nothing.”

A loud rumble vibrates against my cheek. “Not to me.” Sinclair growls.

My hand has been resting on the hard contours of his abs, and I find myself caressing his soft skin, hoping to soothe him the way he so often soothes me. “Honestly the most shocking part of the whole ordeal was seeing them shift... I’ve never seen anything like it. I still can’t believe it.” In fact that might go a long way to explaining why the entire ordeal still doesn’t quite feel real to me.

“Were you very afraid?” Sinclair presses, taking advantage of my sudden willingness to talk.

“I was more afraid for the baby than anything else.” I confess. “That’s what hurt more than anything, when I thought that my brashness might have cost it, instead of just me.”

A low purr rolls to life in Sinclair’s chest. “Nothing they did or would have done was

caused by you, Ella.”

I huff out a laugh. “It seems like there are an awful lot of people telling me things aren’t my fault lately.” I muse aloud. “But at a certain point one has to think the common denominator is common for a reason.”

“Who else?” Sinclair probes. “About what?”

That’s not a conversation I plan on having with Sinclair anytime soon. We might be on better terms, and he might make me feel safe, but I vowed not to make the mistake of trusting another man, and I meant it. Sinclair has already proven himself unreliable on that front. “What does your wolf look like?” I ask, instead of answering his question.

He chuckles, clearly not missing my less-than-smooth transition. “It’s black.” He says simply, “Pitch as the night, with my same colored eyes.”

“Can I see it sometime?” I ask, not quite understanding why I’m so interested in meeting the beast.

“If you like.” He agrees. “But not tonight. Tonight we sleep – and tomorrow we start with a clean slate. Deal?”

For a moment I wonder if such a thing is really possible – part of me thinks it’s too late to stop what’s already begun. Still I have to try, for the sake of my pup if not myself. “Deal.”

Chapter 41 – Parenting Class

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.

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? Before 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.”

“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.

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

"Yeah but that's the baby." I remind him, repeating the 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 – 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, wagging 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!"

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.

The instructor, having given up on us, moves on to the next couple. Still our amusement only lasts a while. After diapers 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 detail 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 chest. At first I was supporting my own weight, but with a little bit of encouragement I gradually leaned back against Sinclair, 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 humans, remember?"

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 happening!" 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 42 – 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 god, what have you put inside me?"

"Well technically, I didn't put it there." I remind her, trying to lighten the mood.

"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.

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 snatch 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.”

“Tell me right now, Ella.” I order.

Chapter 43 – Roger Comes for a Visit

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 eases 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 giggle 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 came 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 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. I 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 – First Real Kiss

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 myself 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.

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 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 scoff, 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. If we have no future, which makes ‘casual’ the only option available to us.” I remind him stiffly.

“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 – but if she won't tell me why she's feeling agitated, how am I 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 promise to communicate more –

shouldn't that go both ways?

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 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.

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.

“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.

Chapter 47 – Ella Takes Matters into Her own Hands

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.

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.

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 Ring

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.

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 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 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 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 Interferes

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, but 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.”

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."

Sniffing 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 me.

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 me. 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 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.

“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?”

Chapter 51 – Ella Learns About Shifter Relationships

Ella

My mind goes blank at first. Sinclair is too close to the truth, to figuring out that I'm not as immune to him as either of us would like to believe. The voice in my head is panicking, but I try to keep it together. Praying for calm, I take a deep breath, and as I exhale I recall the ability to speak.

"Because we're supposed to be in this together, and you played me." I murmur, speaking the truth – but not the whole truth. I can't admit to him that I feel utterly rejected by his ploy, that I feel unwanted on a visceral level and it's tearing me up inside for reasons I don't yet understand. "You played me like I'm one of those reporters, or the Prince."

Sinclair's face twists into a grimace, and the next thing I know he's reaching for me, "Please, come here Ella."

"No." I insist stubbornly, preparing to move away if he tries to approach me.

"I'm sorry." He expresses, looking truly remorseful. "I didn't mean to do that. I care about you, I don't want to hurt you that way."

"Well you did." I reply petulantly. I don't know where this comes from. With anyone else I would have accepted the apology and moved on, whether I actually felt better or not. I've always chosen peace over my own feelings – but I find it very hard to pretend with Sinclair. I think he would know that I don't actually feel better, so why should I fake it?

"I know." He nods grimly. "I promise I'll find a way to make it up to you."

"I don't need some sort of reparation." I insist, "Just... do better, Dominic."

"I will." Sinclair vows soberly, "You have my word."

I breathe a sigh of relief, but Sinclair is surveying me closely. I can tell he wants to metaphorically kiss and make up, but as I suspected, he senses my upset is not wholly resolved. "What else?" He prompts.

"Nothing important." I shrug, not feeling brave enough to ask the questions I'm most curious about.

"Ella," He says my name as an admonition, scolding me for not being honest with nothing but those two familiar syllables. "Come on, tell me what's on your mind."

I gnaw on my lower lip, hating that he can read me so easily, but also relieved that I

might get my answers. “Alright, what was all that about discipline? Those things the Prince said about my insolence? It didn’t just sound like Alpha stuff... I mean it’s one thing to be insubordinate to a leader, but the way you two were talking... it made it seem like all men expect to be in charge of their mates.”

Sinclair’s lips quirk at the edges, and the energy in the limo abruptly shifts. The air around us goes taut, feeling suddenly tense and electric despite the fact that nothing has actually changed. Neither one of us have moved a muscle. Still I know Sinclair feels it too – it’s all too obvious in his reply. “Such a clever little human.”

“You mean it’s true?” I gape. “Why, because of the dominance thing? But that’s so backwards! You just said that strength and all that doesn’t have true value.”

Sinclair emits a low rumble. “I said it comes down to power dynamics, and that dominance isn’t a virtue – but it is a reality in relationships.”

“So what, because men are physically stronger they get to boss around their mates?” I demand hotly.

Sinclair chuckles, flashing his fangs and clearly enjoying my indignation. “You have to remember that shifters are very primal beings. Whatever instincts humans once possessed have been socialized out of you. You’ve been completely detached from your inner animal. But for us? Our inner animal controls everything, our instincts drive everything.”

“And everyone else has to submit?” I guess, feeling a shiver run down my spine. “Even to their lovers?”

“Especially to their lovers.” Sinclair smirks. “For she-wolves, the best mate possible is the one who can best protect and provide for them. Their instincts drive them to test potential partners in order to figure out who is the strongest. They need to feel their mate’s dominance to know they’re safe, to satisfy their own inner animal. Only then will they submit.” Sinclair shares. “That’s part of why I think you’d make such a good wolf. I think you have some of those same instincts. You may not realize it, but you often test your limits with me, the same way she-wolves test their mates to ensure they have the strongest partner.”

“So all that talk about discipline... that was serious? Literal?” I squeak nervously.

Sinclair is up now, crossing the limo to sit beside me, invading my space with his big body. “Yes.” He rumbles deeply. “It was.

Does that scare you?” I don’t know why, but for some reason, his ominous manner makes me think he wants me to say yes, he wants me to be scared. Oh Goddess, what

do I do now?

Sinclair

Ella's eyes are adorably wide, and she's squirming in her seat. However she doesn't look afraid, she looks intrigued – curious. I can see her thighs clenching reflexively, and I can smell the beginnings of her arousal. My wolf howls in triumph. The gendered nature of shifter power dynamics might outrage Ella's human values, but she clearly craves a strong mate just like any she-wolf –

whether she realizes it or not. Her body has always responded to my dominance even when her saucy little mouth argues against it.

“So,” her pink lips form a perfect “o” as she tries to wrap her mind around this idea, “if a she-wolf does something her mate doesn't agree with, she just gets abused?”

“Of course not.” I explain, pulling Ella into my lap. “Only weak men assert their authority through violence or mistreatment. That isn't our way.”

“But you said –”

“Consequences, not abuse.” I correct gently.

“What kind of consequences?” Ella asks, a tiny furrow appearing in her brow. I wish I could read her thoughts right now, but it's enough to see the blend of eagerness and apprehension on her beautiful face – she's excited by this conversation, and more than a little interested.

“Well, what does that word make you think of?” I inquire, thoroughly enjoying watching Ella come to terms with these ideas. It hasn't been easy for me to pull back my wolf from treating her like one of our own, especially when she shows so many wolfish qualities. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping this conversation might open a new door in our relationship.

“With the children I nannied consequences were things like time outs and no screen time – groundings for the older kids.” Ella explains.

“It's much the same with our pups.” I say, to Ella's obvious relief. “But mates aren't pups. You aren't a pup.”

“I don't understand.” She frowns, fidgeting nervously. Her silky thighs are still clenching and it's all the more obvious now that she's settled in my lap. The sweet little human

probably thinks I don't have a clue what she's up to, but I know perfectly well that she's trying to relieve the ache between her legs.

"Sure you do." I encourage. "Just say the first thing that comes to your mind."

"I mean, dominance and submission..." She trails off, her voice no louder than a whisper. "That makes it sound like... kinky sex stuff."

"It does, doesn't it?" I tease, stroking her hip.

"You mean it is?!" Ella exclaims, looking scandalized.

"You never experimented with that sort of thing?" I ask.

She flushes. "I've only ever been with Mike – he wasn't the adventurous type."

"Well in my book, these things aren't adventurous. They're standard – normal and natural." I relate, my voice low and husky.

"And more fun than you can imagine."

"But it's discipline." Ella argues. "Isn't that only fun for you?"

"Not if you're doing it right." I remark coolly. "And it's fulfilling for us both. She wolves need to submit as much as male wolves need to dominate – it's in our dna."

"That sounds completely sexist. Would a she-wolf tell me the same thing?" Ella asks archly.

"Ask Aileen if you want." I shrug.

"Well it's not as if these things really matter for us." She reasons, straightening up a little. "After all, I'm not a she-wolf, and we're not actually mates." Am I imagining a twinge of disappointment in her voice? But over which part? The fact that she's human?

That we aren't mates? Or is she sad she won't experience these things herself? I already know she never had anyone to take care of her – she's never had discipline or consequences in her life, she only knew neglect as a child. Does she want someone who will give her the care she was denied now?

"True," I agree. "But now that you know the consequences, I wouldn't be too surprised if you get them the next time you act out."

"But we aren't lovers!" Ella objects, her pupils dilating and her breath coming in little

pants.

“No, but you’re the mother of my pup, that makes you my responsibility. I’m not saying it would be sexual – I know you don’t want that – but if your behavior needs correcting, you better believe I’ll correct it.” I declare, knowing I’m playing with fire here. This sort of attitude might be catnip for she-wolves, but Ella might take it as a threat.

Her eyes are wide as saucers again, but she doesn’t look frightened, if anything she looks invigorated. “All those times you warned me not to test you, that you were showing leniency because I don’t know your ways...” She realizes aloud.

“That’s right.” I confirm. I watch her closely as my words land, and sure enough, she deflates a little. “You know now, so sneak out again or stomp your little foot on me, and I won’t hesitate to put you over my knee like the naughty girl you are.”

Ella gasps at my blunt words, staring at my lips as though she might kiss me. At first I think I’m imagining it, but then she leans in. She’s going to kiss me.

Chapter 52 – Sinclair’s Warning

Sinclair

At the very last second Ella seems to realize what she’s doing and starts to pull back. Unfortunately for her, the scent of her arousal is filling the small space where we’re confined, and the desire in her eyes is so strong I can’t stop myself. I catch her nape before she can move away from me, claiming her lips in one swift move.

Ella offers me a plaintive little moan then sinks willingly into my arms, sliding her arms around my neck and pressing her soft body flush to mine. I growl in reply, my wolf chuckling in my head when she noticeably shivers. She’s so beautifully responsive, my every touch sending ripples of heat through her small body. It’s only too tempting to continue touching and petting her in new ways, just to see how she’ll react.

Despite her reluctance or disinterest in getting involved with me, Ella shows no hesitation now. I suspect our heated conversation pushed her past her inhibitions or worries. She’s too turned on to think clearly and though I know I shouldn’t take advantage, I’m not a saint. I don’t know any man or wolf who could deny such a sweet offering – and Goddess is she sweet.

Ella returns my kisses with open fervor, parting her lips for my questing tongue and shifting until she’s straddling my lap. Before long her swollen center is pressed to my hardness, separated only by my slacks and her dress. I want to rip the clothes from her body, to expose every inch of her soft skin and finally fulfill my erotic fantasies about her. I’ve become so pent up with sexual tension lately that I’ve found myself making lists in my head, noting all the things I’d like to do with the lovely human if she ever decides to let me into her bed.

It’s practically torture not to escalate our tryst when I know how close I am to making those dreams a reality, yet at the same time I’m overjoyed to simply have Ella in my arms this way. Her lips are completely addictive, and I could happily spend hours tasting her this way. Ella, on the other hand, seems more impatient. She gradually drags her lips from mine and trails them across my jaw and down my neck, her nimble fingers busying themselves with undoing the buttons on my shirt.

When I realize what she intends I catch her slender wrists. “Take it easy, gorgeous.” I advise, worried she’ll regret this if I let it continue. “We’re not even home yet.”

Ella grumbles wordlessly, continuing to lick and nibble her way over my body even as I hold her hands captive. The next thing I know, her little teeth are sinking into my pec – not a nibble or a nip, but a true bite. It seems my sweet human didn’t care for being refused, and she’s reacting like any she-wolf who’s mate isn’t giving her what she needs. I fist one of my large hands in the silky strands of her hair, pulling her off of me before I lose control completely. It takes all my willpower not to throw her onto the seat and claim

her once and for all, but somehow I manage. “Fuck, you can’t do that, Ella.” I grit out.

“Why not?” I look down at her, catching sight of an indignant pout so adorable I have to kiss her again.

“Because only mates bite one another.” I sigh when we part. “It’s incredibly intimate, it carries meanings you don’t understand.”

“So explain.” She counters, her brow crinkling in confusion.

Huffing out a laugh, I loosen my hold on her long hair, stroking my fingers through the tresses. “I can’t. It’s a wolf thing. It’s part of our bond, there’s magic that passes between two partners.” I continue. “And you biting me is like an open invitation for my wolf to claim you. It isn’t easy to hold him back.”

I don’t tell her that this shouldn’t be the case. A simple bite from any random woman certainly wouldn’t tempt my wolf, even a bite from a lover wouldn’t tempt him unless he wanted to claim her anyway. But Ella doesn’t know that and I don’t want to overwhelm her. Still, my words have the intended affect, the idea of my wolf claiming her sobers Ella more quickly than anything else, and the tension between us lowers to a simmer.

I carefully extract the sweet bundle from my lap, placing her on the seat beside me. The fog of lust is still covering her eyes, but I can see her slowly coming down from the endorphin high. Her pulse isn’t racing so fast anymore, and I settle my palm on her belly, feeling our pup. He’s awake and giving off pulses of happy contentment, no doubt pleased to have us both near. I tenderly stroke Ella’s stomach, still reveling in our baby’s elusive consciousness. “The pup’s influence is strong – you’re acting more like a wolf every day.” I observe.

“I’m sorry.” Ella finally confesses, looking truly lost now. “Not just for the bite... for all of it. I don’t know what came over me.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” I answer. “I like kissing you.”

“But it’s not...” She shakes her head. “I don’t want that.” Ella insists, gazing up at me. “Thank you for stopping me, I don’t... I’ve never lost control that way. I made such a fuss about us not blurring the lines of our relationship and then I threw myself at you like that... I really don’t know how it happened.”

I do. I think with amusement. I should have expected as much given Ella’s mischievous streak and the way she’s been playfully testing me from the beginning, as well as the times she’s very seriously pushed back at my authority. She needs a firm hand, she craves the kind of care only a strong mate can provide – and it doesn’t matter one bit that she’s human.

"It's okay." I repeat, "And I will always do what I can to make sure we don't get carried away." One huge exception looms in my mind's eye, and after tonight, I know I can't put it off any longer. "But Ella, I really do need to warn you about the wild hunt."

"How so?" She asks.

"The wild hunt event happens on the second to last night of the festival. It's a tradition where male wolves hunt," I'm careful to put this word in air quotes, just in case she misunderstands, "their mates in the forest."

"I know." She breathes. "Aileen told me all about it. She said I would have to start the hunt, but it was okay that I couldn't shift because I'd enter the forest in human form anyway."

"Yes." I confirm, wondering if my beta's wife told her the rest. "And I assume you know what happens when the she-wolves are caught."

Ella flushes scarlet. "Aileen said you celebrate by 'making new wolves'." As embarrassed as she seems to be saying these words, the darling human doesn't seem to be taking it seriously. I understand why she might not think there's anything to worry about in our case, but unfortunately that isn't the reality.

"Right." I agree again. "But you have to understand that I will be shifted by the time I reach you. My wolf will be in control, and he's not as gentle or patient as I am."

"But you'll shift back, won't you?" She inquires, sounding suddenly anxious.

"Yes, but he'll still be at the forefront, and we'll have been on the hunt." I wonder if she comprehends all the implications of this, then realize she can't possibly. Only a shifter could understand. I know I have to be more direct. "That night brings the dawning of the Solstice, when our magic is strongest. Our wolves will be closer to the surface that day than they are almost any other day of the year. I won't be myself, I won't be able to hold myself back without help from you. My wolf will see the mother of our pup and want to carry out the ritual – to make love to you. If you encourage me, I won't be able to stop myself."

"So I won't encourage you." Ella answers, as if the solution is truly that simple.

"It might be harder than you think." I warn. "The pup is changing your behavior already, and the event is very heated from the beginning. We can't let what happened tonight happen at the hunt."

Ella grimaces, "Okay." She nods gravely, clearly taking the matter very seriously.

“There’s one more thing.” I add, my mouth forming a hard line.

“Yes?” She prompts me.

“Once I’ve caught up to you, you have to stop running.” I state, hoping the baby’s influence isn’t strong enough to make her do this. A true she wolf wouldn’t give up until her mate actually pinned her to the ground, but if it gets that far I don’t think I’ll be able to hold myself back. “If you keep going it will send my prey drive into override and I will chase you down... It would be a different kind of encouragement, but every bit as dangerous. So whatever you do – don’t run.”

Ella gulps, “I promise.”

I’m relieved to have this conversation out of the way, to know we’re on the same page. And yet, I saw how curious Ella became tonight about our ways, and I can see the same curiosity in her now. I just have to hope that curiosity isn’t so strong that she decides to test me on the night of the hunt. If she does – we’ll both be in big trouble.

Chapter 53 – Yuletide Feast

Ella

“You look radiant.” Sinclair’s father is beaming up at me from his wheelchair, “how’s my grandbaby treating you?”

“Oh he’s certainly making his presence known.” I laugh, sliding my arms into the sleeves of my coat. Sinclair is holding the garment up for me, then straightens it around my shoulders as if worried I won’t be warm enough. He’s been particularly on edge tonight, and though I understand his agitation, I’m beginning to tire of being treated like a china doll. “Stop fussing, Dominic, I’m fine.”

“I’m still not sure this is a good idea.” He grumbles. “Your blood pressure was much too high this afternoon and you didn’t get nearly enough rest.”

“You’re the one who keeps telling me how important these events are.” I remind him. “And I feel perfectly well.”

He’s still muttering to himself, and Henry chuckles, “You’re fighting a losing battle, my dear. There won’t be any reasoning with him – I was the same way when his mother was breeding and we weren’t campaigning.”

“It’s too much stress.” Sinclair agrees. “All the media and the royal family, on top of the crowds.”

“Not to mention your brother.” Henry adds darkly. It’s true that this is the first time I’m going to be encountering all of these people together, but it’s also far from the last. The Yuletide Feast is only the third night of the festival, and we still have four more high profile events to get through before we can relax. Even then it will only be a temporary reprieve – we still have the rest of the campaign to get through.

“I’ll be fine.” I insist. “You don’t have to coddle me.”

Both men raise their eyebrows, as if to say that this isn’t my decision and I absolutely do need to be coddled. Sure enough, Sinclair shakes his head and overrules me. “We’ll come home at the first sign you feel overwhelmed – and that isn’t up for debate.”

I turn away, rolling my eyes when I’m confident they can’t see my face. However as I begin to step towards the door, Sinclair pulls me back against his chest. The big Alpha lowers his lips to my ear, his deep voice like rough velvet. “I saw that, trouble.”

My stomach swoops with excitement and apprehension, and I try to make my voice sound stronger than I feel. “And?” I challenge him. “I’m not scared of you.”

A low chuckle vibrates in his chest, and I feel very overheated all of a sudden. “Liar.” Sinclair croons, petting me affectionately.

I’m only too aware that his father is only a few feet behind us and can hear every word. I feel my cheeks flush with color, but the elder alpha doesn’t seem embarrassed at all.

“Alright you two, we’re going to be late.”

We pile out the door and into the back of the limo, Sinclair effortlessly lifting his father into the seat and stowing his wheelchair in the trunk before joining us. I’m deeply curious to know more about Henry’s relationship with Roger, especially given the way he warned us about his presence. “Do you see Roger often?” I inquire shyly.

Dark clouds seem to pass over the older man’s features. “No, I’m afraid my son has never forgiven me for naming Dominic my heir.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.” I apologize, realizing how personal the question was.

“Nonsense, you’re family now.” Henry assures me, looking pensive. “I love my son as any father should,” he shares thoughtfully,

“and when you welcome your pup you’ll learn firsthand that children don’t always appreciate what’s best for them. Roger would not have made a good Alpha, and I had to do what was best for the pack as well as him. Neither would have thrived under his leadership, and I haven’t ever regretted passing the role to Dominic one bit. I just wish it had been possible to do the right thing without sewing so much discord in my family.”

“Roger hated me long before you named me as your heir.” Sinclair interjects, and I can see his protective side coming out in response to his father’s sadness. “He’s been after me ever since Mom died, and becoming Alpha wouldn’t have helped our relationship at all. If anything it would have created more problems. He would have mismanaged things and I would have been compelled to challenge him. You did the right thing.”

“Oh I know,” Henry reaches over to pat Sinclair’s shoulder, “I just can’t help thinking that there might have been a better way, I could have handled it differently, including losing your mother.”

“Everything is easy in hindsight.” I offer gently. “And grief blinds us all, there is no right way to handle it. Besides, it sounds like these cards were already on the table from the start. I’m sure you did the best you could – and that’s all any of us can hope for.”

“Thank you Ella.” Henry proclaims, managing a dim smile. “I appreciate that.”

We continue to the fair in peaceful silence, and I find myself staring out the window at all

the lavish decorations which were put up around the city yesterday. I was too preoccupied fighting with Sinclair to notice when we departed the festival, but the old town has truly been transformed for the holiday. Lights, greenery, ice sculptures and ornaments abound, glittering almost too brightly against the stark white mounds of fresh snow.

The feast is happening against the backdrop of the Midwinter Fair, and though I wish we had time to explore the carnival, when we arrive reporters and photographers are clamoring around us the moment we exit the car. Sinclair growls at them in warning when they edge too close to me, and though they back off, they remain persistent in their demands for questions and photos. So we head straight to the feast, eager to cross the velvet ropes that will block the clamoring media from the main party.

We have to greet the royal family first, bowing and curtseying to the King, Queen and Prince and making polite conversation – at least, as polite as one can be with political opponents. Afterwards we move to our assigned places at the head table, relieved to have the tense interaction resolved.

Sinclair pulls out my chair, but I can't bring myself to sit down. "Oh no," I gulp, holding my breath when I see a large platter of grilled fish on the table. "Is that fish?"

Sinclair follows my gaze, quickly growling at a waiter. "Can you remove the fish, please?"

"Remove it?" The man blinks, looking back and forth between us. I've got my hand over my mouth, and my face is probably very pale from holding my breath. I'm about to break, needing air but knowing the scent will be terrible.

"Yes, the smell makes Ella sick." Sinclair explains, getting impatient with the man's slowness on the uptake. "Get it out of here, can't you see what it's doing to her?"

It's too late, at that moment I lower my hand, heaving in a gasp of much needed oxygen, and feeling my stomach turn in the very same second. I shake my head, knowing I've probably turned green and whimpering when I feel my gag reflex engage. I take off for the restrooms, knowing if I stay I'll be sick all over the beautiful table.

I can hear Sinclair coming after me, but I race into the bathroom just as another woman is exiting. I can barely hear their confrontation over the sounds of my own retching, but when Sinclair doesn't enter I know the stranger must have insisted he not set foot in the lady's room. Propriety must have won out, but I don't mind – I hate being sick in front of people, especially handsome men who give me butterflies.

The door opens just as a second wave of nausea overtakes me, and I hear high heels clicking across the floor. "Oh you poor dear." A feminine voice sounds behind me, and

gentle hands pull the hair back from my face. “There, that’s better.”

“Thank you.” I croak, miserable beyond words.

“Nonsense,” My savior replies. “We she-wolves have to stick together.”

“Well I appreciate it.” I repeat, looking up for the first time. The other woman is beautiful, with short dark hair and bright blue eyes. She’s elegant and sophisticated in a way I’ll never be, and I feel a twinge of shame. I bet this stranger has never done anything as unseemly as vomiting in public – pregnant or not.

“This is your first pup.” She observes kindly, “They’re always the hardest.”

“Do you have any?” I ask, moving towards the sink to rinse out my mouth.

“No,” She frowns, a dark look crossing her features. “I haven’t been so blessed.”

“Oh I’m sorry, it was insensitive of me.” I realize, flushing with embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it.” She gives me a long, lingering look full of unspoken emotion. “You’re very lucky, you know.” She murmurs meaningfully, then turns and leaves without another word. I can’t help feeling as though I’ve missed something important. It’s only after she’s gone that I realize I never even asked her name.

When I return to the feast, Sinclair stands to greet me, reaching for my waist. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I try to summon a smile, “as long as the fish is gone.”

“Do you want to leave?” He asks, stroking my cheek.

I shrug, leaning into his warmth and pressing my face to the curve of his neck. He smells so good, it’s almost enough to make me forget about being ill. His arms come around me reflexively, and I can hear him breathing in my own scent. However rather than purring or humming with contentment like he usually does, his body goes completely stiff. He pulls away from me slightly, his brow furrowing in confusion as he searches my features.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, feeling uneasy. He’s looking at me as if I’ve grown a second head, and I don’t like it one bit.

“You smell like my ex-wife.” Sinclair grits out, his wolf suddenly glowing in his eyes. “You smell like Lydia.”

Chapter 54 – Lydia’s Return

Ella

It takes me a minute to understand what must be happening. The only woman I’ve been near tonight, is the stranger in the restroom. So if I smell like Lydia... that must have been her. It’s no wonder she seemed so mysterious and sad. I feel for her immensely. I know what it’s like to try for years on end to get pregnant with a partner, only for them to succeed with someone else.

Of course, Sinclair didn’t do to her what Mike did to me, they’d been in their struggle together– but it must still hurt. In fact, my pregnancy probably proves the problems they had conceiving were with her, which is devastating for any hopeful mother.

“There was a woman in the restroom.” I tell Sinclair hesitantly. “She helped me, held back my hair.”

“What did she look like?” He demands urgently.

“Dark hair, blue eyes, tall and willowy.” In fact she was my opposite in just about every way, right down to her perfectly manicured nails and custom designer shoes.

Before I can say any more, Sinclair turns and disappears into the crowd, scanning the feast for signs of his ex. My heart falls, faster and harder than I could have believed possible. I can’t believe how painful it is to see him running after her this way, obviously desperate to find her. One mention of Lydia and I might as well not exist. I feel like crumpling in on myself, though I don’t have any right to feel jilted. I’ve known the score from the beginning – Sinclair never pretended otherwise. So why does it hurt so much?

“You should get off your feet.” Henry says kindly, urging me to take my seat. “You still look very pale.” I follow his gesture obediently, not sure how much longer my legs will support me. Sinclair is out of sight now, no doubt chasing down his true mate to convince her to come back to him. I can’t seem to conjure up any words or coherent thoughts, I’m slowly being crushed beneath the weight of my disappointment.

I’m cursing myself for being so silly, for getting my hopes up when I knew better. It’s obvious now I’ve been lying to myself about my feelings for Sinclair, or this wouldn’t be so agonizing. At the same time, It’s irrefutable proof that I was right not to get involved with him. I was right to try and protect myself – even though I failed. I can’t imagine how much worse this would be if I’d actually started a relationship with him.

Stop this, the little voice in my head scolds. You’re overreacting, he just went after her, you have no idea what he’s thinking.

You’re assuming the worst because you expect to be let down.

I expect it with good reason. I reply bitterly. I learned the hard way, remember?

Sinclair is different. She insists. He's special and he cares about you.

He cares about the pup. I correct her. He's protective of me for its sake and he might be grateful to me for carrying it, but I'll never be a she-wolf. I'll never be in his league and we both know it.

That's your insecurity talking, not your brain. Think of the way he compliments you! You're more than just a surrogate to him. She presses.

And the moment I deliver this baby, I guarantee I'll cease to warrant his attention. I predict grimly. Just you wait and see.

Before my conscience can reply there's movement in my periphery, and a new voice joins the conversation.

"I tried to warn you." Roger appears as if from nowhere, but he obviously saw what happened. "I told you she would always come first to Dominic."

"Roger, that isn't fair." Henry rumbles beside me, giving his eldest son a disapproving glare.

"Oh hello, Father." Roger quips, turning his attention to the former Alpha. "It's been too long – I'm surprised you still remember my name."

"That's your own doing." Henry answers fiercely. "I still call you every week though you never pick up the phone. I'd be thrilled to see you any time you like."

I feel a rush of sympathy for Sinclair's father. I might not be a parent yet, but I know that I already love my baby more than I thought possible. I hate to think of how badly being rejected by him would sting – no matter how old he gets. Most parents would probably give up after a while, to save themselves the pain if nothing else. It speaks volumes that Henry has never stopped trying to be in his son's life, and I'm glad that Sinclair learned how to be a father from him. I might not ever have my feelings for Sinclair returned, but I know my baby will always have his father's love and protection. That's certainly more than I could have said for Mike, and more than many women get from their partners.

However Roger clearly doesn't feel any sense of gratitude for his father's dedication. Instead he turns his nose up in disgust,

"You clearly let that injury steal your dignity as well as your mobility. No true Alpha would shamelessly chase after someone who clearly didn't want to be around them."

“No true father would let a bitter child push him away without a fight either.” Henry growls back, showing a glimmer of his former strength. “Like it or not, I will always be there for you – even and especially when you don’t want me to be.”

“That’s called smothering.” Roger complains, curling his lip.

“It’s called parenting.” Henry counters coolly. “And if I didn’t teach you that well enough then I’m relieved you don’t have pups of your own.”

“Please don’t fight.” I cut in. I hate disagreements, especially between men. That’s another lesson I learned the hard way – men are dangerous when they lose their tempers. In fact, it’s amazing that I’m not more frightened of Sinclair’s temper– given how intimidating he is. Maybe it’s because he’s always so in control, but somehow I know in my heart that he wouldn’t ever raise a hand against me. The more I think about it, the more I realize that I can’t recall ever trusting anyone the way I trust Sinclair. That must be the pup’s influence too, he’s bonded with Sinclair and knows he isn’t a threat, so I don’t fear him either.

“I’m sorry, Ella.” Henry proclaims swiftly. “You’re right, it’s the holidays, we shouldn’t be arguing like this, especially not in front of you.”

“I’m sorry too.” Roger concedes, though he doesn’t sound it. “I simply thought you might need a friendly ear, what with Dom taking off on you.”

“He didn’t take off, he simply went to investigate.” Henry sighs, sounding as though he’d like to scold his son some more and is holding back for my sake.

“Investigate what?” Roger scoffs. “He knows it was Lydia in the restroom with Ella, and he knows she wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t still interested in him. If he went after her, it’s because he wants to see her. He chose her over Ella, just like he always will.”

Henry, who doesn’t have the first clue that Dominic and I aren’t really mates, looks outraged in my honor. “Why in the Goddess’s name would you say such a thing?”

“Because it’s true.” Roger states simply. “I’m not going to lie to Ella like the rest of you. Dominic and Lydia are fated, their bond is more powerful than anything they’ll ever share with another.”

Henry shakes his head. “Then why did she leave? Why did Dominic let her go?”

“Because she thought he couldn’t give her children and he believed it too, he wanted better for her so he didn’t go after her. But now it’s clear he can father pups, they can try again.” Roger surmises, gesturing to my middle.

“They weren’t right for each other.” Henry argues. “And though you don’t want to hear it, she wasn’t right for you either.”

“We were in love – every bit as in love as Ella and Dominic, but as soon as their bond kicked in, none of that mattered.” Roger reminds the other man. “The Goddess doesn’t make mistakes.”

I want to protest, to correct him and attest that Sinclair and I aren’t in love, or tell Henry that he doesn’t have to defend me this way. I want to scream that it’s all just a sham for the campaign – just to make them stop talking about it. It’s no longer the disagreement I mind, I just can’t stand to be reminded of how little I mean to Sinclair over and over like this.

I can see that Roger is biased, but I also feel for him. He lost his mother, he grew up in his younger brother’s shadow and lost his birthright and his chosen mate to him. He was clearly scarred by those experiences, and part of me agrees that Dominic shouldn’t have gotten involved with his brother’s ex – fated or not. Maybe Roger is trying to manipulate me, or maybe he really is trying to help – either way, he isn’t lying. Lydia and Sinclair are bonded in a way I will never be with any man – least of all the father of my child.

Before anyone can say another word, I turn on my heel and walk out.

Chapter 55 – Sinclair Catches Up with His Ex

Sinclair

It doesn't take me long to catch up with Lydia. Once I caught her scent on Ella, it was easy to track her through the fair. I leave the feast pavilion and set off into the twinkling lights, finally spotting her in front of one of the food stalls near the snow maze.

She's standing in line for mulled wine, and she looks exactly like she did the last time I saw her.

I wait for the familiar tug on my heartstrings, for our bond to trigger my wolf – to hear him chanting mine in my head the way he does with Ella. But it never comes. I don't feel compelled to claim her, or even to approach her. If it weren't for the fact that she'd been sniffing around Ella and my pup, I wouldn't even consider going near her. I'm amazed to realize that – after all this time –

I'm finally free of her influence. I'm finally over her, and she no longer holds any power over me.

When did that happen? I wonder. The last time I saw her was over a year ago, and though I hadn't felt anything like affection for her, my wolf had still recognized our mate just like always. There was chemistry between us even though I'd wanted nothing to do with her. Then again, maybe the fact that I felt so much animosity for her then was evidence of lingering feelings. I can honestly say I feel nothing for her now, and that seems much more final than when I still held our past against her.

Taking a steadying breath, I approach. Lydia turns to face me when I'm still a few paces away, and she gasps in surprise.

"Dominic!"

I feel my hackles raise instinctively. I don't believe her show of surprise for one moment. She obviously knew I was here because she helped Ella in the bathroom, and my scent was all over the little human. In fact, knowing Lydia, she'd probably approached Ella in order to engineer this exact situation. I'm annoyed with myself for playing into her hands – but I also couldn't do otherwise.

A jealous female is a threat to a breeding she-wolf, especially when the title of Luna is on the line.

"What are you doing here, Lydia?" I demand coolly, not bothering to greet her.

"Oh come now, Dominic, is that any way to greet your mate?" Lydia smiles, batting her lashes.

“Don’t do that,” I growl. “We haven’t been mates for a long time now, and I know you approached Ella – what are you up to?”

“We might not be married anymore but we’ll always be mates, whether you like it or not.” She reminds me, her smile dimming but not disappearing. “And I was curious. I heard you found a new Luna and I wanted to see my replacement for myself.”

“Ella isn’t your replacement.” I bite back, “She’s nothing to do with you at all.”

“She is a pretty little thing, I’ll give you that.” Lydia sneers in return, flashing her fangs. “But she seems awfully meek for your taste. I thought you liked strong she-wolves, not frail damsels who are afraid of their own shadows.”

“I’m not going to talk to you about my mate, or dignify your comments with a response.” I declare icily. “Where’s your new husband anyway, surely you didn’t come all this way alone?”

“Oh, Sloan is back in the Bloodbane pack. He doesn’t like to travel.” She answers boredly.

“Does he know you’re here?” I inquire, wondering if things are sour enough between them that he doesn’t care, or if she’s sneaking around behind his back. I don’t know an Alpha alive who would allow his Luna to go visit her ex alone, even if they were in an unhappy relationship – it would look too bad for his reputation.

“He knows what he needs to know and no more.” She answers archly, confirming my suspicions.

“You can’t honestly tell me you were willing to go to all this trouble just to get a look at Ella.” I counter. “What are you up to?”

She laughs humorlessly. “I guess the damsel act works, you were never this protective of me.”

“Of course I was.” I hiss. “I loved you with all my heart – even after I realized you only married me for my title.”

Lydia pretends to look offended. “How can you say that, we were fated.”

“Fate didn’t matter to you until after my father named me his heir.” I recall, “remind me, how many years did you stay with Roger after figuring out I was your true mate? And how long did it take you to leave him after realizing he’d never be Alpha?” I don’t need her to answer me. I know the dates like the back of my hand. Roger never realized it, but

our bond presented itself when I was just sixteen – two years before my father named me his successor. Lydia broke my brother's heart the very next day. I knew it then, but I was young and foolish. My wolf had been pining after my mate for so long then that I would have done anything to be with her. I couldn't see her for the scheming social climber she is – but I do now.

"You're right." She simpers. "I wasted too many years on him hoping to become Luna. I should have listened to my wolf from the beginning. Maybe if I'd gone to you when the bond first appeared we would have had children and we could have avoided all this drama."

"Or maybe we'd be in exactly the same place we are now." I counter. I wish I could tell her how easy it had been for Ella to conceive with me. That even after the damage Mike did to her ovaries, one simple insemination had done the trick when years of trying hadn't gotten Lydia and I anywhere. I might point it out if I didn't think it was so cruel. For all her faults, Lydia had always wanted pups, and I know better than anyone how much it hurt her not to conceive.

"No." She frowns. "I obviously gave up on you too quickly. I blamed you for our fertility struggles but I was wrong. I think we deserve another chance."

Oh. Of course, now it all makes sense. She's back because she knows I'm not sterile, but she still can't conceive with her husband. "Go home, Lydia." I grit out. "Go back to your husband. You're still young. It wasn't in the cards for us, but it obviously can be with other people. Ella proves that."

"You know she's not strong enough to be your Luna." Lydia whispers in an undertone, looking up at me from beneath her lashes.

"Keep her as a plaything if you like, but don't put her in charge. If you care about her you wouldn't subject her to that pressure.

Let me come back, we can keep trying and if it doesn't work I'll even adopt her pup as my own."

It takes all my willpower not to reel back in shock. I always knew Lydia was calculating and power-hungry, but I didn't think she'd go to this length. I don't even believe this is all about Ella – except that Ella finally gave the Alpha counsel and the allied packs enough confidence in my ability as King to get me elected. Is Lydia here because she thinks I can give her a child after all, or because I might be king after all? Maybe it's both – but either way, she isn't here for me.

Ella isn't here for me either, but her dedication to our baby is undeniable. I know she'd do anything for our child, and I've never seen that kind of emotion in Lydia. Ella has

more love in her little finger than Lydia does in her entire body, and that's the mother I want for my son.

"You're out of your mind." I tell her bleakly. "You can't honestly believe I would ever take you back after you walked out on me.

You're the reason I might lose this campaign, and that puts the entire realm at risk. You should have stayed for that duty alone."

"I wanted more than duty, Dominic." She argues, puffing out her lips into a pout. "Is that so wrong?"

"You wanted power." I correct. "You've always wanted power, but never the responsibility that comes along with it."

"You're wrong." She insists. "And I'm going to prove it to you, I'm going to win you back, Dom!"

"You're not, because I'm happier with Ella than I've ever been." I'm amazed to realize I'm telling the truth. We're not even together, but I feel like I've finally found the partner I've been looking for in life. Even if nothing ever happens between us, I know we'll be good parents together, and lifelong friends to boot. I might wish we could be more, but I'm satisfied just having Ella in my life. As I think this, I turn away from Lydia, wondering why I ever let her drag me away from my heart's true desire.

"I'm not going to leave, Dominic." Lydia says to my back, and I can hear other shifters murmuring around us. Our conversation is clearly private no longer, and I regret coming after her. "I'm not going to give up on you."

"I've made my decision, Lydia." I counter, turning away again. "Deal with it."

My good mood only lasts until I get back to the feast table, where I find my father and no sign whatsoever of my little troublemaker. "Where's Ella?"

My father sighs, looking tired and forlorn. "She left."

Chapter 56 – Ella Gets Her Hopes Up.

Sinclair

I stare at my father, not comprehending his words. “What do you mean she left?”

“Well you took off and your brother came along and started whispering in her ear about Lydia and picking arguments with me.”

Dad explains pointedly. “I wasn’t surprised when Ella walked away – the poor thing clearly doesn’t like conflict. I thought maybe she’d just gone back to the restroom, but she hasn’t come back and I haven’t seen hide nor hair of her since.”

“Damnit.” I swear, dragging a hand through my hair and looking around. I don’t see the guards I specially assigned to her, and I can only hope that they’re with her – not searching for her too.

“What were you thinking, running off that way?” My father scolds.

“I had to make sure Lydia wasn’t a threat to her or the pup.” I grit out, wondering just how much damage my impulsivity has done. Between leaving Ella alone, publicly arguing with Lydia and now preparing to walk out before the feast has truly kicked off, it’s entirely possible that I’ve hurt my campaign – not to mention the mother of my pup.

“I understand that but you must know how that looked to Ella.” My father sighs. “And Roger didn’t help.”

“What did he say to her?” I demand, more harshly than I intended.

“About what you’d expect.” Dad grimaces. “That Lydia came back to try to mend bridges and you would dump Ella in a heartbeat to get back together with your fated mate.”

A low growl tears through my chest, and I’ve half a mind to go track down my treacherous brother and make him eat his words.

However my wolf won’t allow that. He’s demanding we see to Ella first – her welfare is more important than punishing Roger.

I make my excuses to the King and Queen, using Ella’s illness as an excuse. No one could fault me for caring for my breeding mate rather than furthering my campaign, and Dad and I return to the limo without much objection. The driver confirms he took Ella home a little while ago, but I won’t relax until I can talk with her.

When I get home, my rooms are empty, and I know it’s a bad sign if Ella is sleeping in her own bed. She only ever does this if she’s unhappy with me or – Goddess forbid, in

need of privacy to relieve our sexual tension. Still, after the night we've had I doubt there's much danger of the latter, so I make my way to her rooms without hesitation.

I enter without knocking, finding Ella curled beneath her covers but wide awake. She sits up when I enter, her golden eyes wide.

"You're home already?"

"You didn't think I'd stay after you left, did you?" I inquire, coming to sit on the edge of her mattress.

"I don't know." She shrugs. "I wasn't sure you'd notice I was gone." She winces almost as soon as the words are out of her mouth. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that – I sound like a spoiled child."

"Don't apologize." I admonish, "not for sharing your feelings."

"But they're so petty." She whispers, flushing bright red.

"You're allowed to be petty every now and then." I tease, brushing the hair back from her face. "it's the least I can offer when you're giving me a baby. What you're not allowed – is to run off without telling anyone where you're going." I continue sternly.

Ella peeks up at me from beneath her lashes. It's amazing how different she and Lydia can seem even when wearing the same expression. Lydia had adopted this look to try and manipulate me, but Ella's shyness is entirely genuine. "You asked me if I wanted to leave, but then you disappeared before I could answer."

"Uh-huh," I hum, sliding my hand around to her nape. I close my hand around the back of her neck, massaging her tense muscles with my thumb. "You don't really think I'm going to let you get away with that, do you?"

"I took the guards with me!" Ella protests, clearly knowing she was in the wrong, but attempting to push her luck. "I didn't break any rules!"

"But you didn't tell anyone where you went." I reply. "My father was really worried about you, and so was I."

"Oh." She frowns, looking truly guilt-stricken. "I'm sorry, that's not what I wanted."

"What did you want?" I press, encouraging her to lean her weight against me.

"I just wanted to get out of there." Ella murmurs, leaning her head against my shoulder.

“Is that really all? You weren’t angry at me? Trying to punish me for leaving you alone?” I suggest, trailing my hand up and down the curve of her spine.

“Not consciously.” Ella reasons, “I just felt overwhelmed, you were gone and Roger and your Dad were arguing, I didn’t know what else to do.”

“And I suppose it didn’t have anything to do with the things Roger said to you about Lydia?” I inquire.

“He didn’t tell me anything that wasn’t true.” Ella remarks, repeating a sentiment very close to the one she’d shared the first time Roger sought her out. I hadn’t cared for her acceptance of his warnings then, and I certainly don’t now, given everything that’s happened between us.

“Oh yeah, like what?” I probe, overflowing with suspicion.

“That you two are fated and I’ll never have that bond with you. He’s not wrong.” She answers blithely. Despite her casual tone, I can see the tension behind her eyes. Perhaps it truly doesn’t bother her but she understands he was out of line, or maybe she cares more than she’s letting on. Is it terrible of me to hope for the latter? To hope she’s sad about this painful truth?

“We’ve talked about this once before, he shouldn’t be saying those things to you – he was trying to be hurtful.” I clarify, wishing I hadn’t been so thoughtless as to leave her alone and vulnerable to his interference.

“Or maybe he was just hurt.” Ella suggests, using a tone I haven’t heard before.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Ella pulls away from me, though not by much. “Look, I don’t want to get in between you two, and I know you’re right. He lashes out at everything and everyone... but he does it the way a wounded animal does... I can’t help but feel sorry for him.”

My mind reels and I try to keep my wolf calm. Ella sympathizing with Roger bothers me more than I’d like to admit. I love that she has such a big heart, but she doesn’t know even a fraction of his misdeeds, let alone what I suspect about his recent scheming. I guarantee she wouldn’t be feeling sorry for him if she knew he might be behind her attack, or helping the Prince to keep me from winning the throne.

Ella leans closer to me when she feels my muscles tense, and damned if it isn’t effective. It’s very difficult for me to stay in a bad mood when her soft curves are pressed up against me. “He hasn’t gotten what he wanted out of life and he might be wrong to blame others for his misfortunes... but I know what it’s like to be denied that way.” She

continues, clearly feeling the need to explain herself.

At once I understand what Ella means. She sees something of herself in Roger, though she fails to grasp the core differences between them. Roger has let his misfortunes twist and corrupt him into a wolf without integrity or morals, whereas Ella has stayed pure of heart no matter what challenges she faced – and I guarantee they were considerably greater than my brother's.

"You did once, not anymore." I correct fiercely, taking her chin and forcing her to hold my gaze. "From here on out you're going to get what you want, Ella. I won't see the mother of my pup denied happiness."

Adorably, Ella places her hands over her ears, as if she might block out the sound of my voice. "Don't! Please don't." She pleads.

"I don't want to get my hopes up, it will just hurt all the more when they fall through."

At once I'm furious with a world that has conditioned her to think this way. I wish I could go back in time and find her when she was a young girl, to take her under my wing and protect her from the cruelties she's faced. I know she wouldn't be the same woman today without them, but I still wish I could spare her the pain.

"Listen to me very carefully, Ella." I instruct, staring into the brilliant pools of her golden eyes, "I'm going to do whatever I can to ensure your hopes aren't ever dashed again. I can't promise you'll never be disappointed, but you have my word that if it's in my power to give you what you want, you'll have it."

"I don't trust this." Ella confesses, not meeting my gaze. "It sounds too good to be true." She slowly raises her eyes to mine, taking a deep breath as she summons her courage. "You sound too good to be true."

"Then I guess I'll just have to prove myself to you, won't I?" I grin, grazing my knuckles over her cheek.

She shakes her head. "I don't need you to be anything more than you already are, just please don't tell me to wish for the moon when I can't even reach the sky."

"That's because you've been reaching on your own all this time." I inform her gently. "It doesn't have to be that way."

"No?" Ella questions, her eyes shuttering. "Then maybe you'd like to tell me what Lydia had to say when you found her?"

Too late I realize I pushed too hard, I promised too much, and Ella is calling me on it. I

need to make a decision and fast. Do I tell her the truth and make her fear for our future with our baby, or do I shield her from Lydia's intentions and protect her peace of mind?

Chapter 57 – Sinclair Makes Progress

Ella

I'm holding my breath for the second time this evening, though this time it isn't to save myself from any bad smells or illness.

Now I'm waiting to see if Sinclair will be honest with me about his ex-wife, or if he'll let me down again with another lie. In truth I'm expecting him to disappoint me, though I don't believe he has bad intentions. On the contrary, I think he's much too determined to protect me – but he's very mistaken if he thinks keeping me in the dark is going to make me safer. If anything it will put me more at risk. I don't want to be blindsided again, and after what happened with Mike I feel especially sensitive about dishonesty – however well intentioned.

He sighs, and drops his hands from my face. His green eyes bore into me, and a muscle flutters in his cheek, betraying his agitation over the evening's events. "Roger wasn't entirely wrong. Lydia is back because she wants us to try again."

For a moment I'm so surprised he actually admitted this that I can't speak. At the same time, my heart sinks and swells. It hurts me to know this information, but I'm touched and impressed that Sinclair confided in me. He really does seem to be trying to do better and communicate more, and I appreciate it immensely. As I work through my conflicting feelings I gradually wrap my mind around his words. "Try again." I repeat. "For a baby, or as mates?"

"Both." Sinclair answers simply, shaking his head. "But it's not going to happen."

I blink, "Why not?"

"There's a reason I didn't go after Lydia when she left." Sinclair growls, a dark look overtaking his features. "She might have walked out, but our marriage was over for a long time by then."

"But I thought..." I trail off, remembering Sinclair and Roger's conflicting statements about mates. Roger made it sound like fated couples shared a love deeper than any ocean and no chosen bond could ever compete, but Sinclair described things differently.

He said that he and Lydia hadn't been good for one another, that some chosen couples were happier than fated ones. "You're fated," I finally continue, wondering if I'm asking this because I believe it, or because I'm afraid of the possibility. "Don't you love her?"

The corner of his mouth twitches up into a sad smile, and for a moment I can imagine the boy he once was. I can imagine a young Sinclair diving headfirst into love without any fear at all – driven by his strength and innate confidence. Now he looks as though

he learned his lesson the hard way, and though some bitterness remains, there's also acceptance.

"Sometimes I think the Goddess fates some couples because they have to go through the experience in order to become the person they're destined to be, not because she intends them to stay together forever, or even that they're well suited to each other." Sinclair explains thoughtfully. "Sometimes they might be sent to test a chosen couple's bond, or even to break your heart."

There's always a larger plan, though it's hard to accept that the painful parts of life serve any purpose other than tormenting you."

"I actually think that's a comforting idea." I reply, thinking of my own relationships. "I've never believed in fate or destiny before..."

but I'd much rather think that I spent all those years with Mike for a reason I don't yet understand, than believe it was all just a waste – that it was all for nothing."

Sinclair does smile now, pressing his hand to my belly. "That's right. If it wasn't for him, you never would have conceived this baby." His eyes sparkle with mischief, and his grin turns positively canine. "Though I'd still like to let my wolf have a go at him."

"You didn't answer me, you know." I point out, covering his hand with my own and wishing I could feel our child's emotions the way Sinclair does. "You didn't say whether you still love Lydia."

Sinclair makes a low rumbling sound, "I don't want to talk about Lydia anymore. I just want to be here with you and this little one."

I pull my hand away, sensing I've crossed a line. It worries me that he won't answer me, but I prefer his silence over untruths or empty platitudes. Besides, he told me he wasn't going to get back together with Lydia, and I don't feel confident enough with him to press my luck on the matter. I know the look of a man who's said all he's going to say on a subject, and if I keep pushing he'll just double down. There will be time to talk about her more in the future.

Sinclair, meanwhile, is gazing at all the bedding piled around my body. "It's only eight o'clock." He reminds me, his brow wrinkling with concern when he realizes I'm still wearing my feast dress. "Were you too exhausted to change?"

I flush. "No, I was just really cold after the festival. I couldn't feel my fingers or toes."

He tsks, grazing his knuckles over my cheek. "Poor baby, do you feel better now?"

“I did,” I answer, tilting my chin up and shooting him an accusing stare. “Until you came and untucked me.”

His wolfish smile is back, the one that makes me feel like I need to lock myself behind a closed door before he huffs and puffs and blows my house down to devour me. Suddenly the goosebumps covering my arms have nothing to do with the cold air, and everything to do with the predator in front of me.

“Then let’s warm you up.” Sinclair purrs, just before he pounces.

I squeak and cry out as he joins me beneath the covers, and though I’m not sure why, I immediately try to wriggle away. I know he just plans on snuggling with me, but the little voice in my head pushes me to give chase, and my human instincts don’t need any encouragement to run from the big bad wolf. Of course Sinclair catches me easily, tickling and playfully wrestling until I’m giggling uncontrollably.

I barely notice when he strips off my dress, and I don’t complain when he removes his own clothes either. Soon we’re both in our underwear, and my entire body is surrounded by Sinclair on all sides. The blankets are over our heads, and all I can see is the dim glow of his green eyes. “I thought the idea was to warm up.” I say, laughter still filling my voice.

“Body heat needs skin to skin contact to work.” He smirks – I can’t see it, but I hear it in his voice as clear as a bell. “Don’t they teach you humans anything in school?”

“I dunno,” I muse suspiciously. “I think you just like having me naked. I think maybe I should go climb into a nice hot bath instead of letting you take advantage this way.”

Sinclair makes a low grumbly sound that sends delicious shivers down my spine. “First of all, you aren’t naked, not yet anyway.”

He counters, his words a sultry promise. “Second, baths are dangerous business, I think you might need supervision.”

“Dangerous?” I scoff, still giggling.

“Mmm,” He confirms gravely. “Slips and falls, drowning, bath snakes – you definitely need a lifeguard.”

My cheeks hurt from smiling, but I can’t seem to stop. “Did you say bath snakes?”

“Oh yes, we get whole infestations in these parts, they’re terribly venomous.” Sinclair replies, still sounding very somber and serious.

I love this playful side of him, even though this is all starting to get a bit too close to the romantic territory I'm desperately trying to avoid entering. The only reason I can handle this is because it's dark and he's behaving himself. If I have to see him undressed –

feel the heat of his gaze on my own body or goddess forbid if he decides to help me wash and starts touching me – I'll be a goner. The idea is incredibly enticing, but I have to stay strong, I can't fall for this man.

A spark of inspiration strikes me then, "But if you're playing lifeguard, who's going to feed me dinner. You know I left the feast without eating?"

Sinclair stills, and I can tell my words did the trick. He might be enjoying flirting, but I know his instincts won't allow him to let me go unfed. I've learned that he considers it his duty as an alpha and the father of my child to make sure the baby and I have enough to eat, and the only way I ever get away with skipping a meal is if I'm sick. "And I lost my afternoon snack at the feast." I remind him.

Sinclair growls, "You're a clever little minx, you know that?"

"You've mentioned it once or twice." I murmur, wondering if he can see my blush.

"Alright, you go have your bath." He sighs, his wonderful heat leaving me as he untangles our bodies and rises from the bed.

"When you're warm and clean I'll have dinner waiting, just be careful." He drops a kiss to my temple and strides out of the room.

"Watch out for snakes."

Once he's gone I flop down on the bed and exhale deeply. "I am in so much trouble."

Chapter 58 – Damage Control

Ella

On the fourth day of the festival we wake to headlines about Lydia's reappearance in Moon Valley. I'm just coming out of the bathroom following my morning bout of vomiting, when I find Sinclair standing in the doorway, glaring at the newspaper. I startle slightly, not expecting to see him in my rooms. I left his bed only half an hour ago, and wasn't planning on seeing him again until breakfast. I'm not sure what's on the front page of the paper, but it must be bad if it couldn't wait.

He glances up at me, frowning deeply. "I thought I asked you to tell me when you feel ill."

"Dominic, it's happening so often now that it would be impossible to tell you every time, and it's not as if I have a lot of warning when it comes on." I argue, though this isn't the full truth. As much as his presence and gentle hands soothe me, I still find it horribly embarrassing to be sick in front of him, and I avoid informing him whenever possible.

Sinclair narrows his eyes, but before he can call me out for bending the truth I cross the distance between us. "What's going on?"

He shows me the paper, which is dominated by a large black and white photo of Sinclair and Lydia by the snow maze. The headlines are in bold black lettering above the image. Trouble in Paradise? Former Luna Returns to Reclaim her Mate.

My eyes widen in shock, and I quickly scan the article. While the media had been kept away from the main feast, they clearly hadn't been barred from the rest of the fair. Worse, it seems like they overheard most or all of Sinclair's confrontation with Lydia.

Though Moon Valley Alpha Dominic Sinclair seems to have won the lottery with his second chance mate, Ella Correntin, his attention wasn't on his bride-to-be at the annual Yuletide Feast in Oldtown. Instead the prospective King was seen chasing his ex-wife Lydia Davis – now of the Bloodbane pack – through the fair, causing his pregnant mate to walk out of the event in protest. Onlookers report that the two engaged in a heated conversation wherein Lydia professed her desire to mend bridges with the Alpha, claiming she still loves him and that his second chance mate isn't strong enough to lead the Moon Valley Pack, let alone the Kingdom. Though Sinclair rejected her advances, Lydia fiercely declared she wasn't going to give up on him, leaving many to wonder if the fated pair might be able to repair their relationship.

"They're all like this." He shares, tension lacing his words. "Every paper and tabloid is some version of this. Fucking Lydia probably planted the story herself, given the way they left out the pieces that might make her look bad."

Guilt washes over me as I realize how leaving the festival must have looked to

onlookers, especially given this information. "I'm so sorry I left." I murmur. "I didn't think, I should have stuck it out and waited for you to come back."

Sinclair frowns down at me. "What are you talking about?"

"It makes it look like I was angry with you and we're on the rocks." I explain, my pulse fluttering.

"Ella, none of this is your fault." Sinclair promises. "If anyone is to blame it's me for arguing with her in public, and Lydia for turning up to cause trouble in the first place."

"But –" I try to object.

"I said it isn't your fault, and I meant it." Sinclair interrupts, placing his pointer finger against my lips.

"Is this going to hurt the campaign?" I ask, though it comes out rather muddled since his finger is still pressed to my mouth.

"It's a hiccup." Sinclair states simply, "We'll do some damage control at the festival tonight. I'll invite a few trusted reporters and make a statement refuting all this, but the more important part is that we put on a good show. We'll look so happy and in love that everyone will forget this ever happened."

"Okay." I nod, trying to steady my nerves. "And it's wassailing tonight, right? So all we have to do is drink and sing carols and enjoy the fair."

"Right," he confirms.

"I wish I could really drink." I lament. "I could use a bit of liquid courage tonight."

"You have nothing to worry about." Sinclair croons. "I know it makes you nervous but you always do beautifully at these events."

"When I stay at them long enough to participate, you mean?" I correct him, still regretting my decision to run out yesterday.

"You're growing the pack a prince," Sinclair smiles, "you get a free pass when it comes to all these public responsibilities. In case you've forgotten I was voting for you to stay home entirely until you convinced me otherwise."

"I should have let you coddle me after all." I sigh, "we could have avoided all this."

Sinclair gathers me to his chest, hugging me tightly. "I'm glad to see you're learning that

I'm always right." He teases.

Groaning, I try to squirm out of his hold – much good that it does. "You know I regretted it the moment I said it."

"I'm not going to let you forget it, either." Sinclair chuckles.

I laugh, ceasing my struggles and submitting to his petting. "Bossy wolf."

When we arrive at the festival, the media descends almost immediately. Cameras are flashing before we even exit the car.

Sinclair wraps a protective arm around my shoulders, growling softly when the reporters get too close, and eventually they back off, realizing they'll be endangering more than their careers if they invade my space.

"Alpha, do you have any comment about the reports regarding your ex-wife?" One of the reporter's asks, shoving a microphone forward.

"I'll tell you what I told Lydia last night," Sinclair begins coolly. "That I'm happier with Ella than I ever was with her, and there's not a snowball's chance in hell that I would ever take back someone who walked out on their pack when they needed them most.

There's no love lost between us, but I have no respect for a Luna who abandons her responsibilities as a leader."

The reporter murmur and exchange glances, and suddenly the microphone is pointing to me. "Ella, how do you feel about Lydia's accusations that you're not strong enough to be the Alpha's mate?"

I lean into Sinclair, trying to draw on his own raw power to give myself the confidence I need. "I think that Lydia is obviously the kind of woman who believes there's only one way to lead, and one way to be strong. If she believes that compassion and kindness are signs of weakness, well – I think that says more about her than it says about me."

Sinclair leans down, dropping his lips to my ear. "You're too humble." He rumbles affectionately, making me blush. "You ought to tell them how fearlessly you braved those bath snakes yesterday."

I can barely contain my laughter, grinning up at him and whispering, "I can't say that."

Sinclair's cheeks split into a wide smile, and he kisses the tip of my nose before turning

back to the clamoring paparazzi, “trust me, gentlemen, this one stands up to me on a daily basis. She might come in a sweet package but she’s got nerves of steel.”

I’m blushing again, but the reporters are eating it up. They’re wearing the ravening expression of hungry jackals, and I suspect they’re thrilled to be getting this on tape. I can already predict the waves this will make – when Sinclair looks at me the way he is now I feel like I’m the center of his universe, and I know it’s all an act. To outsiders it will be beyond convincing. “Is there anything you would tell Lydia, if you could, Ella?”

“I would tell her that if she cares about her life she’ll stay away from my mate.” I growl, surprising myself with my own ferocity.

Where on earth did that come from? “And that the next time she wants to get a look at me she can introduce herself directly, rather than sneaking up on a breeding woman while she’s suffering morning sickness.”

This last statement causes a near frenzy, and Sinclair growls again. I watch as the crowd covers instinctively, tucking their proverbial tails between their legs. “When did this happen?”

“Last night.” Sinclair answers darkly. “Why else do you think I went after her, or that Ella left? We’ve all seen what jealous she-wolves can do at the best of times, and I don’t take threats to my family lightly.” While the crowd immediately begins clamoring for more information, Sinclair raises a hand to forestall them. “Now, I’m going to take my beautiful mate and get lost in the snow maze.” He announces, squeezing my waist. “And don’t be surprised if she’s seeing stars when we come out again.”

Hearty chuckles rise from our audience and though I assumed Sinclair was joking, I quickly learn quite the opposite. He spends the rest of the evening kissing and caressing me for all to see, and by the time we get back to the house I think I’m so turned on that I think I’ll go crazy if I don’t find a release. Unfortunately there’s no chances for that tonight because Sinclair takes me to bed almost as soon as we walk through the door. For the first time I seriously consider throwing in the towel and simply asking him to have sex with me, even though I know it’s just my libido talking. The little voice in my head is whining with need, and I find myself hungrily watching Sinclair as he climbs into bed beside me.

Can I really do this?

Chapter 59 – Dream Date

Ella

In the end my exhaustion saves me. I hadn't realized how tiring the evening was, but the added pressure of putting on our show for the reporters must have taken more of a toll than I expected. I fall asleep almost as soon as my head hits the pillow, but as fate would have it, I can't even escape Sinclair in my dreams tonight.

I know I'm dreaming from the very start. I'm still in Sinclair's bed, but it's no longer in his opulent mansion. It's in the middle of a starlit forest, with nothing but trees and wilderness surrounding it as far as the eye can see. I'm wearing a simple white negligee

– more evidence that this isn't real, I don't own anything like it. A cool breeze flutters over my skin, carrying the scent of evergreens and moss, rich amber and... Sinclair. I would know that scent anywhere, even though I can't see him yet.

He appears slowly, moving towards me through the darkness, his green eyes glowing through the trees. He's wearing nothing but a pair of simply black slacks, and for the first time I don't feel shy about appreciating his gorgeous physique. I've always averted my eyes when he undresses in front of me, not that this prevents me from feeling his muscles or the huge member between his legs when our bodies are pressed up against each other in bed. But now I look my fill, raking my eyes over the rugged planes of his face and the contours of his chest. His tall frame is padded with muscles most human men can only dream about – some of which I didn't even know existed.

"Hello beautiful," Sinclair greets me huskily, prowling closer with every ragged breath I take, his naked torso gleaming in the moonlight. "Didn't you get enough of me when you were awake?"

"How could I?" I pout, feeling completely face to express my sullen mood. "You teased me all night long and I haven't had any relief. It's torture!"

"It's not easy for me either." He murmurs sympathetically, crawling up onto the big bed. He moves with such lethal grace, crawling over the plush covers until he's close enough to reach out and touch me, which he immediately does. He lies on his side, encouraging me to come rest in the protective circle of his arms. I don't resist. I slide into his embrace as easily as I breathe, feeling completely at home with this dangerous man wrapped around me. It seems strange to think he terrified me a month ago, now he's my safe space.

"It's not the same." I insist, looking over at him from beneath my lashes.

"Why not?" Sinclair asks, brushing the hair back from my face.

“You don’t know the effect you have on me ” I confess, pressing a bit closer. I might be asleep but my breasts are still aching, and my sex is swollen and dripping with need. It’s rather freeing to be able to rub myself against Sinclair without fear of embarrassment or worries over opening a can of worms.

“Tell me,” He growls, his voice deep and rough. One of his massive hands tangles in my hair, forming a fist in the long silky strands while the other slides down over my bottom, hitching my hips closer, until the pulsing bundle of nerves at the apex of my things is right up against his hardness.

“Even the smallest touch sets me on fire.” I complain. “You holding my hand feels more intimate and arousing than another man kissing me.”

“And when I do kiss you?” Sinclair prompts, encouraging me to move against him, guiding my hips to rock against his.

“I might as well be molten lava. My entire body turns to liquid – figuratively and literally.” I confess, and I know he understands.

My wetness has already seeped through my panties and onto the sleek black fabric of his trousers. “You have a power over me I don’t understand, I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

“You don’t really think it’s different for me, do you?” Sinclair murmurs, lowering his mouth to my throat and brushing his lips over my pulsepoint.

“Of course it is.” I whine, so frustrated that I feel like I might cry.

“Can’t you feel how hard I am for you, Ella?” Sinclair inquires gruffly, nuzzling my skin, grazing his fangs over the spot where my neck meets my shoulder. “How hard I always am for you?” I’m shivering with need now, especially as his words combine with the feeling of his steely length against my clit.

“Well that doesn’t mean anything. You’re in bed with a half naked woman, it would happen with anyone.” I reason miserably.

Sinclair chuckles, “I think you’ve been around human men for too long, they’ve given you a very low opinion of my sex.” He raises his head at last, taking a break from laving the soft spot behind my ear. “Trust me, it doesn’t happen for just anyone, no matter what they’re doing or how lovely they are.”

“But I’m nothing.” I insist. “I’m just a human, I don’t have the kind of power you do.”

“You’re not nothing.” Sinclair growls, a dangerous edge in his deep voice. “And you

might be human but you have a power all your own. Don't you know how difficult it is for me to be near you without touching you? How impossible it is to hold myself back when you're in my arms, when all my instincts are driving me to make you mine? Ever since we met I've felt like an addict, and you're my only fix."

"That's probably just the baby." I murmur, sighing when the fabric of my teddy slides off my breast, finally allowing one taut nipple to meet Sinclair's bare chest, teased and tickled by the coarse black hair scattered over his pecs. "It has to be. It doesn't make sense otherwise."

"You don't give yourself enough credit." Sinclair answers, his lips mere inches from mine. "And you give me too much and too little all at once."

"What do you mean?" I wonder aloud, not really wanting him to answer. I just want him to kiss me, to strip off my negligee and finally relieve the terrible ache which seems to have taken over my very soul. I think Sinclair can sense my growing desperation, but for some reason he isn't giving me what I need. He's holding himself back, taking away his kisses and questing hands.

"I don't do casual either, Ella." He catches my hips when I get so distracted rubbing myself against him that I stop listening, too intent on chasing my pleasure. I whimper when the delicious friction I'd been building ceases, and Sinclair clucks sympathetically. Still, he doesn't show me any mercy. Instead he tilts my chin up so I'll have to look him in the eye, "I don't waste my time on people I'm not serious about, or relationships that aren't going anywhere."

"I don't know why we're even talking about this." I relate, "It's not like this is even real, it's just my imagination run out of control."

Sinclair's eyes shutter, and he leans his forehead against mine. "Goddess, sometimes I forget how much you don't know about shifters, how much you can't know."

"Please, Dominic." I beg, needing to move, to perform the carnal dance our bodies were made to create together. "Won't you kiss me, won't you touch me?"

"I'd like to touch you and taste you and all the rest." He grumbles reluctantly, and suddenly his strong hands are gone from my body, and his warm limbs are pulling away from my own. "But I need to leave before I do something I'll regret, something you'll regret."

"I don't understand." I admit, my nose crinkling up in confusion.

Sinclair pauses only long enough to lean over me and run his fingertip down my nose, straightening out the wrinkles. "You will when you wake up."

Before I can say anything more, Sinclair begins stalking away through the dream forest, leaving me alone, and entirely unsatisfied.

When I wake up, I find Sinclair watching me, stroking my hair and gazing down at me with a tender expression. "Welcome back."

I blink and stretch, feeling as though I only just fell asleep. "It's not morning already, is it?" I yawn.

"No." He smiles gently, "You're just coming out of the dream."

"How did you...?" I stop short of finishing my sentence. Logic tells me he must be guessing, or that maybe I was talking in my sleep or some other explanation. However when I look into Sinclair's eyes, I see the truth. He isn't speculating, somehow he knows I was dreaming, and as the seconds tick by it becomes more and more obvious that he knows I was dreaming about him.

Worse, I fear he's managed to decipher some of the details from the fantasy.

"It's okay, Ella." He soothes, petting me as if I'm a skittish horse.

No, oh no. He knows – he knows everything.

Chapter 60 – Shared Dreams

Ella

Sinclair is watching me struggle through the idea that he somehow shared my dream, that he knows everything I said – secrets I would never admit if I'd known he wasn't just some fantasy my sleeping brain cooked up. I just admitted how deeply I'm attracted to him, how much he turns me on. I can't believe how shamelessly I rubbed myself all over him – I might as well have been a dog in heat, practically begging him to make love to me.

I did beg, I realize belatedly, And he left. He walked away even though I was his for the taking. He must have thought my behavior was pathetic. He's wanted to kiss me in the past, he even said he wanted me in the dream, but that was before I debased myself that way. I suppose that sort of thing isn't befitting of a Luna at all.

Suddenly Mike's voice sounds in my head, and I remember the way he belittled me for liking sex. You're a stunner, Ella, but you're too eager. Men don't want a girl whose legs fall open at the first opportunity – show a little class. He never realized it was the physical intimacy I liked, never connected the dots that sex with him was more about conception and closeness than pleasure. It would be different with Sinclair, I can tell that much already. I find more pleasure with him in the foreplay than I ever found with Mike in ten years of being together. He's awakened parts of my body I didn't even know existed – and now he knows it.

Sinclair is still stroking and petting me, and I can't take it. I've got to put some distance between us or I'll lose it. I wrench myself out of his arms, and he lets me go – again, the little voice in my head moans. I climb out of the bed and though my cheeks are already flooded with heat, I can feel myself flushing deeper still. "I... you... that was real?" I stutter, trying to comprehend the impossible.

"No, it was a dream." Sinclair explains. "But we shared it. Bonded mates often visit each other in their dreams."

"But we aren't mates, I'm not even a shifter." I protest. "How did this happen?"

"As you said, it must be another gift from the baby." Sinclair replies easily.

"So you knew, all along, that it was real?" I gape, my embarrassment and shame quickly giving way to outrage. "And that I had no idea?"

"Yes." He confirms gravely. "I knew."

"Why didn't you tell me!?" I burst out, feeling like I might cry. "You had to know I wouldn't have said or done those things if I'd known! I was vulnerable and you took advantage!"

Sinclair rises from the bed, unfolding his big body and prowling after me. I can see now that he isn't as unaffected by this situation as I initially thought. His eyes are blazing and his muscles racked with tension. His hands are closed into white-knuckled fists and his voice is low and husky. "Ella, I might be a shifter, but there are limits to even my abilities." He rumbles. "I would have to be dead not to respond to such a tempting invitation, and you called me to your dream, not the other way around. I got caught up in the moment just like you did. I couldn't resist... not until you reminded me that you don't understand our ways."

"How can I have called you to my dream, when I didn't even know I was doing it?" I question, confusion swirling around me in a dense fog. "And why did you come?"

"Because I wanted to." Sinclair replies, his jaw clenched so tightly the muscle twitches. "I was telling the truth about the power you have over me, Ella. I might keep some things from you, but I don't tell falsehoods. I don't say things I don't mean, even in dreams."

I wrap my arms around myself, unsure what to make of this new information. I want to believe him, as terrifying as that is, but doubts continue to plague me. "Then why did you leave?"

Sinclair exhales, and I can tell his patience is hanging by a thread. "Because you thought it was just a fantasy and I'm trying to respect your wishes."

"Oh." I utter softly, furrowing my brow. That isn't what I expected, and though it should make me feel better to know he took me seriously when I told him I wasn't interested in being with him, part of me is deeply disappointed. I know I'm being contrary and hormonal, but I can't help it. I need more time to process this, and until I have it I'm not going to be making sense – even to myself.

Sinclair's gaze sharpens on me, pinning me in place. "Why did you think I left?"

I shrug, "I thought maybe I was being too eager. I know men don't like that."

The imposing Alpha crosses the floor until he's towering over me. My first instinct is to back away, but I find my feet frozen to the floor, unable to move. I peek up at him hesitantly, and find a fierce expression on his handsome face. "Any man who wants a lover without passion is an idiot. Yours is electrifying, and knowing I can set you alight makes me feel more powerful than anything else. Your 'eagerness' as you call it, is a gift, and I'd like to hunt down every man who's ever made you feel otherwise and beat them to a pulp."

I drop my gaze to the floor, staring at my feet. His words warm me through and through, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Still, I can't help thinking that this is very

dangerous territory. It's getting harder and harder to resist my attraction to him, and it's especially difficult when he speaks to me this way.

So why are you resisting? The little voice in my head demands. You like him, he likes you, why are you fighting it?

She has a point. I've just been given proof that Sinclair not only returns my attraction, but also that he takes it seriously. Still, I can't help but remember the second half of his statement – he doesn't waste his time on relationships that aren't going anywhere, but that's exactly what we would be. We have no future together, and we both know it, we're just in denial because we want to give into our desires.

Because there's one thing more important than either of us. I remind her, Our baby. We're about to bring a child into the world, and it deserves two loving co-parents who can give it their full attention, not a pair of exes too caught up in their own drama to prioritize their child's best interest.

But why are you so sure you'd end up as exes? She inquires. You're predicting the end before you've even had a chance to begin.

I'm being realistic. The best Sinclair and I can hope for is a temporary fling. I bite back. Maybe we could have some fun together, but at the end of the day he's going to end up with a she-wolf who can rule by his side. I'm playing a dangerous game here pretending to be something I'm not, and it's safer for everyone involved if I fade into the background after the campaign while he finds love elsewhere.

Sinclair is watching me again, and he taps his finger lightly against my temple. "You wanna tell me what's going on in there, trouble?"

"We can't keep doing this Dominic." I state, drawing in a shakey breath. "If we stay on this path, we're headed for trouble."

He nods, cupping my cheek and smiling when I reflexively lean my head into his hand. "Listen Ella," He broaches carefully. "I don't need to know why you don't want to get involved, but I don't have unlimited self control. If you invite me into your dreams in the future, if you offer yourself up to me that way again, I don't think I'm going to be able to say no."

"But I didn't know I was doing any of that." I say, "not for real. I don't even know how I called you to me."

"I know that." He remarks, "I'm just trying to be up front with you about where I am with all this."

“Well we only have to worry about this until after the pup is born right?” I ask, more upset by this thought than I could have predicted. “I’ll lose the connection to you when I’m no longer carrying him.”

“We’ll always be connected through our pup.” Sinclair corrects me, “but yes, I suspect many of these bonds will fade in time.”

My face falls, and I wish I had the same talent Sinclair does for masking my feelings. I’m about to pull away from him when he stops me. “There’s something else, Ella. This may sound terrible to you, but there’s something else you have to understand about shifter relationships.”

“Yes?”

“It’s in a she-wolf’s nature to make her mate prove himself to her. She won’t accept him until she’s been convinced he’s the one.

It’s a sort of mating dance – like the wild hunt, she plays hard to get and he gives chase.”

“Okay.” I gulp, my tongue darting out to lick my lips. “So what does that mean?”

“It means that if you give me reason to think that you do want to be with me but you’re holding yourself back for some reason, my wolf is going to react the same way he would to a she wolf drawing him into the hunt.” Sinclair announces ominously.

“You’re saying that you might stop respecting my wishes if you think I don’t mean them?” I repeat, indignance rising up inside me.

“That’s what being an alpha is all about. Doing what’s best for your mate even when she doesn’t agree.” Sinclair confirms.

“But I’m not your mate.” I say, amazed that I’m having to remind him of this for a second time tonight.

“We’ll see, Ella.” Sinclair purrs, his eyes glowing with barely restrained fire. “We’ll see.”

Chapter 61 – Baby Bump

Ella

“Wait what?!” I exclaim, certain that I must be hearing things. Sinclair can’t have possibly just said what I think he did.

He smiles, tracing circles on the soft skin of my belly. “You heard me.” He teases.

“Completely naked?” I gape, blushing at the idea alone. “Everyone? Even the children?”

“I’ve told you, shifters don’t associate nudity with sex the way that humans do. It’s our natural state.” Sinclair explains gently. “No one feels self conscious, because there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

I should have known something was up when he came in this afternoon and woke me from my nap, climbing into bed behind me and sliding his hand underneath the hem of my top so he could feel the baby. I’d whined at being disturbed, but cuddled closer to him anyway, stretching into his tender caresses like a sleepy kitten. Only once I was purring with contentment did he broach the subject he’d come to discuss.

The fourth night of the Solstice festival is apparently devoted to something called moonbathing. I’d hesitated over this idea when Aileen first showed me the schedule, but had been so distracted by the idea of the wild hunt and the masquerade ball that I hadn’t been able to focus on it. Now, however, I can’t focus on anything else. Sinclair has just explained that the moonbathing ritual involves stripping off one’s clothes and anointing our bodies with oil, then laying out in the full moon’s light. I’d been okay with this up until the point when Sinclair clarified that it would happen at a sacred stone circle – surrounded by other shifters.

“But... it’s also natural to be curious about other people’s bodies, doesn’t everyone stare? Doesn’t that bother you?” I squeak, thinking of all the times I’ve been uncomfortable beneath the male gaze when fully clothed, and not wanting to even imagine how much worse it would be naked.

“It doesn’t bother me to be studied or admired,” Sinclair shrugs, looking down at me intently. “But I can understand how that might be different if I was a human woman, and used to being looked at like an object. You have to realize that male wolves don’t disrespect she-wolves that way.”

“So when you were with Lydia, it didn’t bother you for your mate to be naked in front of other men?” I don’t think I would be so generous if the tables were turned, in fact I’m already thinking about all the she-wolves that will undoubtedly be checking out Sinclair and I do not like it.

“No shifter would be stupid enough to lay their eyes on the Alpha’s mate in the manner you’re thinking – not if they want to keep their heads connected to their bodies.” Sinclair assures me. “And if they’re envious, it’s no threat to me. In fact I enjoy having a partner others covet, it just goes to show I won the lottery, and reminds me to be the best mate I can, so that I’ll be worthy of her.”

I consider this for a moment. On one hand I’m very wary of any man who wants a partner they can show off like a trophy – that was exactly what Mike did and I know it’s a far cry from being truly valued or respected. At the same time, Sinclair isn’t talking about women the same way Mike used to. He doesn’t want to show off his mate to make others feel jealous, or feel threatened if someone else glances her way. What’s more, he associates envy with her intrinsic value, not a boost to his own ego or masculinity.

“Now,” Sinclair continues, a sharp edge in his voice now. “If they were to disrespect her, to sniff around her despite my claim, or set a single paw on her...” He growls wordlessly, sending shivers down my spine. “Now that would be another matter entirely.”

I snort when I see the menacing expression on his face. “Sometimes I get caught up thinking shifters are so far ahead of humans, and then you say things like that and I remember you’re just big furry beasts wearing the guise of civility.”

Sinclair chuckles. “We all have our contradictions.”

“I don’t.” I argue, notching my chin up defiantly.

“I beg to differ.” Sinclair replies warmly, his fingers dancing over my bare skin in increasingly sensuous patterns. “You’re the fiercest little ball of mischief I’ve ever encountered, but you’re also the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen,” He purrs, “or held...” His lips drop to my neck, just barely grazing them across my skin. “or tasted.”

“Hey, none of that.” I object, pushing his head away. “I don’t need you getting me all worked up right before I go strip naked in front of a hundred strangers.” I admonish, my voice trailing off as the reality of the event ahead of us sets in.

“It’s gonna be okay.” Sinclair promises. “Besides, all anyone’s going to be doing is trying to figure out if you’re showing yet. This is a royal baby, remember.” He says, tapping a finger on my belly button.

“Well they’re going to be disappointed.” I sigh, though in truth it’s been a few days since I stood in front of the mirror and glared at my middle, willing it to show signs of the life growing within.

“Are you sure about that?” Sinclair arches a brow. “This feels like a baby bump to me.”

I promptly push up onto my elbows so that I can look down at my stomach, even though sitting up puts my neck dangerously close to Sinclair's mouth again. I can almost feel him thinking about stealing more kisses while I'm distracted. Ever since we admitted that we're attracted to each other, he's been more forward about showing me affection, which only makes it more difficult to resist my feelings. If only I didn't enjoy his touch so much, maybe then I could be more forceful about rebuffing his advances.

His oversized hand is sprawled over my tummy, keeping my shirt bunched up beneath my breasts. It's hard to see anything with his palm in the way, so he traces the outline of my womb with a featherlight touch. Sure enough I'm surprised to see the smallest of swellings just north of my pelvis. I suppose part of shifters' short gestation is seeing these changes much sooner than expected, but that scares me too. What if my body doesn't have enough time to adjust, to go through all the changes human mothers spend nine months manifesting.

I think Sinclair can sense my unease, because the next thing I know he's kissing my belly – once, twice, three times.

"I said no kisses." I scold him, earning myself a low rumble in Sinclair's chest, and his green eyes flashing at my challenge.

"I'm kissing the baby." He insists, a devious, wolfish grin on his face. "He likes it."

"Oh sure." I reply tartly, "blame it on the baby."

"He does." Sinclair repeats, kissing me again before slyly adding, "But then he likes it because it makes you happy."

"You're incorrigible." I roll my eyes, but I'm blushing too. And more than that, I'm amazed to think the tiny life growing inside me knows what I'm feeling this way. It didn't seem strange when the doctors told me he could sense my stress, but I suppose I attributed that to him being impacted by the physical symptoms of stress, not truly feeling my emotions. My heart both swells and tightens in my chest as I contemplate this idea, that we have a bond every bit as strong as Sinclair's, I just can't feel it.

Suddenly I'm crying, and Sinclair stops his teasing and crawls back up my body, clucking sympathetically. "What is it sweetheart?"

"Nothing, I'm just being silly." I hiccup, shaking my head. "It's hormones, that's all."

"Why don't you tell me, and then we can decide together if it's silly." He replies, brushing the pads of his thumbs over my cheeks, caressing the tears away.

"I just wish I had a connection to him like you do." I confess. "I wish I could sense what

he's feeling. I want you to be close with him, of course. I'm just... jealous, I suppose. You'll always be the better parent, you'll always know what he needs without asking, and I'll be bumbling around blind in comparison."

"That's not silly at all." Sinclair assures me. "It's only natural that you should feel that way. But you're wrong about something, Ella. You'll have a bond with the baby every bit as strong as mine by the time you bring him into the world. Mothers have connections to their babies most fathers – even shifter fathers – can never have, because we don't carry and deliver them. We can't nourish them with our own bodies, we're not the ones who sheltered and protected them in the first and most vulnerable months of their existence."

"You promise it will be as strong as yours?" I ask, sniffing.

"I think you're focusing on the idea of a bond too much." Sinclair muses. "You have to remember that a connection isn't the same as a relationship, Ella. All parents are bonded with their children, but some still have terrible relationships, just like everyone is bonded to their lover, but some couples are much happier than others."

"I think it's difficult because it's just such an abstract idea." I share, already feeling less blue. "I mean, you tell me something is magic and I'm automatically going to assume it's more powerful than natural things."

"But magic is part of nature." Sinclair corrects me. "The Goddess created all of it at the same time. The difference is simply that you didn't know about it."

"Right." I nod slowly, telling myself to keep this reminder at the forefront of my thoughts.

"Better?" Sinclair prompts, stroking my hair.

"Yes, thank you for making me talk about it." I profess, feeling a strong urge to hug the big Alpha.

"Always." He agrees, "Now get ready, we have some moon bathing to do."

My eyes go wide. "Wait, I spoke too soon, I'm not better at all, I think I need to stay home and process this."

Sinclair chuckles, "nice try, trouble. We leave in half an hour." He leans down and kisses the tip of my nose before sliding from the bed, leaving me with a low purr. "And I, for one, can't wait."

Chapter 62 – Moon Bathing

Sinclair

“This is the weirdest thing I’ve ever done!” Ella exclaims, shifting restlessly beside me. We’re just arrived at the festival, and though she’s only wearing a silk robe, she looks stunning. She’s also nearly beside herself with anxiety, and getting increasingly feisty the closer we get to the big event.

“Poor darling, you’re shaking.” I croon, pulling Ella into my arms and rubbing her back. She’s all sharp edges, stiff and grumbling unhappily into my chest, but snuggling into my warmth despite her grumpy mood.

“Of course I’m shaking, it’s freezing. I’m wearing next to nothing and it’s winter!!” She exclaims, gesturing to the snow falling around us. “How are we even supposed to do this ridiculous ritual without getting hypothermia!”

“First because wolves run much hotter than humans.” I answer, catching her hands and tucking them between our bodies so they’ll get warm too. “Second, because the stone circle is surrounded by thermal pools and the base is heated from below by hot springs. I promise you’ll be plenty warm. And if you’re not then there’s always body heat.”

I’m waggling my eyebrows suggestively, but Ella doesn’t laugh. She pouts, peeking up at me, “I thought you were going to respect my wishes.”

“I’m doing my best.” I share, “but it isn’t easy. Especially when you’re so beautifully responsive.”

This much is true, I might have an easier time respecting Ella’s boundaries if she didn’t react so openly and passionately to my advances. But the reality is that she’s obviously affected by me, and it’s hard not to feel encouraged when she melts into my arms like hot honey.

“That’s just my hormones.” Ella insists. “You have to listen to what I say, not what I do.”

“Ah, so ‘actions speak louder than words’ doesn’t count in your book.” I tease.

“That’s right.” Ella answers stiffly, “My body isn’t my own right now, it’s the baby’s. That means you have to take my word over my reactions.”

“Alright.” I agree. “But I hope you’ll give me a little slack when I slip up.”

“I thought being an Alpha was about always being in control.” Ella argues.

“Maybe,” I concede, chafing her chilled limbs with my warm hands. “But my wolf is in

charge when it comes to mating, and he's not nearly as patient as I am."

"But there's no mating here!" Ella objects, "In case you've forgotten, I'm human!" Her whispered words are barely audible even to my own ears, but I still glance around to ensure we can't be overheard.

"I haven't forgotten." I answer. I wish I could. It seems if I'm not thinking about romancing Ella, I'm thinking about how vulnerable she is living among shifters. Even now, I'm painfully aware of how fragile she is in comparison, surrounded on all sides by vicious predators. The poor thing is still shivering and I'm worried she might have been right, without a wolf's resilience to the elements, it might be too cold for her to participate. Though in truth, I think it's only partly due to the weather. I suspect she's trembling with apprehension as much as she is with cold.

Guilt washes over me, and for a moment I wonder if I'm doing a terrible thing putting Ella through all this. Not only these events that throw her so far out of her comfort zone and into a world she doesn't yet understand, or even asking her to suffer through the cold and discomfort, but asking her to tell so many lies. Asking her to perform an elaborate fraud, to go against her own honest nature to deceive and trick people. I don't believe it's possible to corrupt Ella, or her life would have already done it, but it feels very hard to forgive myself for forcing her into this situation. In hindsight I can clearly see that's what I did – it might have been her idea, but she'd felt like she had no other choice, for I told her I would take her child away.

I know all the justifications for our scheme – avoiding a civil war, preventing a despot from taking the throne, saving countless lives. And there's no way of justifying ending all this just to save one human some distress – yet I want to. I want to go back in time and tell Ella I will keep her and the baby a secret so that they'll never be in danger from my enemies, and never have to adopt this facade. I want to call off our arrangement so that she won't shiver anymore. Now not only do I think my wolf is broken, I think I'm losing my mind as well.

"What?" Ella presses me sullenly, "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I was thinking that when this is done we can go home and curl up in front of a warm fire, and then I'll rub your feet and feed you hot chocolate." I answer.

"Why can't we just go home now? We've made an appearance and kissed for the cameras! We should just say I'm ill and make our apologies." Her tone goes from exasperated and sharp, to sounding so small I might believe it belonged to a child. "I don't want to do this."

"I know, baby." I murmur, tucking her head to my chest and stroking her long, silky hair. "I promise we'll leave as soon as we're able."

“But Dominic—” Ella is raising her voice now, and trying to pull away from me. I know she’s only lashing out because she’s feeling so much emotional turmoil. I’m sure the pregnancy hormones aren’t helping, but it’s clear she needs me to help ground her, to calm her down because she can’t calm herself.

I tighten my hands on her, beginning to purr even as I rumble. “This is an important ritual.” I explain, in a tone that makes her visibly squirm. “I know you’re cold and afraid Ella. Honestly, I would spare you this if I could – but missing this isn’t like missing the feast. It would be seen as disrespect to the Goddess.”

Ella is struggling internally, her body responding to my purrs and my dominance, but her mind no doubt consumed with battling thoughts of duty and unhappiness. Her eyes begin to shine, and I fear she might start crying.

No, I hate it when she cries. My wolf complains, not that he needs to remind me. He whines like a pup any time Ella sheds so much as a single tear, even for silly reasons like eating all of her snack. I increase my purrs, and Ella glares at me. “That isn’t fair, I don’t want to be comforted right now.”

“Maybe you don’t want it, but you need it.” I answer sternly, and Ella takes up a mutinous muttering.

“Ella, I’m going to take care of you. It will be over before you know it. I won’t make us stay a minute longer than we have to.”

She’s still glaring, but her plump lower lip is also trembling. “Fine.” She snaps, her voice thick with emotion. “But for the record, I don’t like you very much right now.”

“I know.” I smile, kissing her upturned mouth. I’m not the least bit surprised when she nips me, quickly sinking her little teeth into my lip and releasing them again just when I begin to feel the sting. My wolf growls deep in my chest, loving her fire but not about to let her get away with this. Ella trembles again, but in a very different way this time. Her demeanor is exactly that of a chastised she-wolf, reassured and excited by her mate’s strength.

“Behave.” I instruct, not bothering to soften my tone. The light in her eyes is impish now, rather than sad or frightened, and I’m pleased to see her cheeks flushed with color. “It’s about to begin.”

I lead Ella through the moonlit forest, following paths so familiar to me, yet completely new to Ella. Before long we’re crossing the bridges straddling steaming thermal pools, and crossing into the sacred space of the stone circle.

I pull my robe off, then reach for the belt at her waist. “Just look at me.” I advise, “Keep those gorgeous eyes on mine, and just pretend we’re all alone.”

Ella nods nervously, and I carefully uncinch her robe, pulling the garment from her body and baring her for all to see. I don’t take my eyes off her either, even as I’m handed the necessary oils by an attendant. I drip the slick liquid onto my fingers, then paint it onto Ella’s body. I deposit the sweet smelling substance on her neck, her temples, then use a different bottle for her wrists and palms – then finally I take the third oil, and trace the letters of my name over her heart.

I wish I could look down and watch the oil dribble down between her luscious breasts, to appreciate the beauty of her form, but she needs the eye contact more than I need to satisfy my lustful urges. “You’re doing so well, sweetheart.” I praise, handing her the bottles so that she can anoint my skin. Following my example, she applies the oils without taking her eyes away from mine, going up on her tiptoes to reach my temples.

When it’s done, we stretch out on the heated stone slab beneath our feet, and I pull Ella close, using my big body to block her from view from as many people as I can. Still she doesn’t take her eyes from mine, and I continue praising her, genuinely proud of how brave she’s being.

We lie together under the moon until her eyes grow heavy, and I know it’s time to leave.

When I wake the next morning, I’m unsurprised to be greeted with more headlines about us, though these are a far cry from the last breaking news in which we featured. Every last article is a veritable celebration of our mating, eagerly reporting that we’re so in love that we couldn’t take our eyes off one another.

I’m thrilled, but I know we’re facing a far greater challenge tonight – the wild hunt has finally arrived.

Chapter 63 – Meeting Sinclair’s Wolf

Ella

“How are you feeling?” Sinclair asks, standing in the doorway of my bedroom. The wild hunt is tonight, and I know he’s not merely asking about my morning sickness or fatigue.

“Nervous.” I confess. “Do you think...” I trail off, blushing and unsure if I can actually speak the question I need to ask.

“What is it Ella?” He inquires, coming forward with an encouraging smile.

“Do you think I could see your wolf before we go tonight, just so that I’ll recognize it when I see you?” I whisper, barely loud enough to hear myself, but knowing Sinclair’s wolf ears will be more than capable of picking up on the sound. And so I won’t be scared. I add silently in my head.

“Of course.” He chuckles, “That’s a great idea. I should have thought of it myself.”

His powerful hands move to the buttons on his shirt, and I find myself taking a step back.

“What are you doing?”

“You wanted to see my wolf, I don’t want to ruin this shirt.” He shrugs. “It’s one of my favorites.”

“Right.” I breathe, “Right, of course.”

He continues stripping off his clothes, and I work hard to avert my gaze. So far I’ve been very successful in avoiding temptation by not looking at his body in these vulnerable moments, and I’m not about to change that now – on the day when it’s more important than ever that we practice self control.

“Does it hurt, shifting?” I ask, staring at my fidgeting fingers.

“It does the first time.” Sinclair shares, “The first time is almost unbearable, it takes hours and hours, but once you’ve gotten it over with it happens fast as lightning, too quickly for you to feel the pain of your bones breaking and rearranging.”

“That sounds ghastly.” I feel suddenly lightheaded, “How old are you when you shift the first time?”

“It’s a little different for everyone – most make the change when they go through puberty.” Sinclair informs me, pulling off his trousers.

Already I’m thinking of my baby – my son – eventually suffering through this sort of grisly

shift, and I don't like it one bit. "What was yours like, was anyone with you?" I squeak.

"Mine was as painful as anyone else's. But my father was with me, he got me through it, just like I'll do for our son." He states, a promise in his voice.

"Good." I sigh, feeling relieved to know Sinclair will help guide our child through the process. I can imagine Henry was a very gentle and supportive presence for Sinclair, and I know he'll be the same. "I suppose... I probably wouldn't be allowed to help?"

Sinclair offers me a tender smile. "No sweet Ella. I'm afraid it would be much too dangerous." He comes forward, taking my face in his oversized hands. This is probably the first time he's ever been unclothed when I'm not, and I'm amazed at how much stronger I feel with my own body covered. I never realized until now how vulnerable it is to be undressed and exposed when others are not, but Sinclair doesn't seem to mind one bit. He's still wielding the power in this room, and part of me resents his constant strength. "Now, do you want to talk, or do you want to meet my wolf?"

"Yes, sorry." I flush.

"Don't apologize." He murmurs, "and don't get close to me until after I've shifted, you don't want to be within reach of my claws when I make the transformation."

I nod wordlessly, my pulse pounding in anticipation. Sinclair backs away from me, holding my gaze the same way he did last night at the stone circle. I keep my eyes on him, watching with horrified fascination as he ensures he's not near anything breakable, then disappears. There's a loud crack and the air seems to go blurry, I even feel a bit nauseous trying to keep track of the rapid movement. However when my eyes adjust and I'm able to take in the familiar room again, I see that where Sinclair was standing a moment before, now there is only a huge, black wolf with glowing green eyes.

I'm sure my eyes are as wide as saucers, and I feel my jaw going slack. "That's not a wolf that's a bear!" I blurt out, saying the first thought which came to my mind.

The wolf, who is much, much too large – far larger than any natural wolf and probably almost as tall as I am – gives me an affronted look, as if I've insulted him gravely.

"I'm sorry, not a bear!" I quickly amend, still trying to reconcile the fact that the beast in front of me is actually the man who spends every night wrapped around me like a very muscular heated blanket. "But how are you bigger as a wolf than you are as a man!"

He huffs and rolls his eyes, sitting on the rug and waiting patiently for me to recover from my shock.

"I mean honestly, I could ride you." I point out, my head filled with images of me mounted

on his back like a particularly deadly variety of horse.

Suddenly Sinclair's expression goes so mischievous and heated that I don't need to hear him speak. I know exactly what he's thinking and his mind is clearly in the gutter. "Not like that! You know what I mean." I'm amazed that anyone could manage to be so suggestive without speaking a word, or even possessing human features. "... what do I do, how do you communicate with other wolves when you're like this. Do you have mental links like you do with the baby?"

He nods, wagging his tail and astonishing me. I never imagined that the imposing Alpha would ever do something so very doglike, but then again his silly side always surprises me. Suddenly it seems positively hilarious that Dominic Sinclair is sitting in front of me with the squirmy energy of a puppy, and I realize that he's holding himself back from approaching me until I'm comfortable with this.

"Can – Can I touch you?" I inquire meekly.

The furry behemoth nods again, and though I don't know how I understand his reasoning, I know he's waiting for me to come to him. It takes a minute for me to find the courage to move my leadened feet, but I manage. I slowly cross the room, feeling terribly anxious to be approaching a creature out of the horror stories I grew up fearing, even though I know it's just Sinclair.

Up close he's even larger than I realized, still taller than me even seated. He looks as though he could snap me up in one bite, and my mind spins with mathematical equations, trying desperately to figure out how his mass increased so much. It defies logic.

You're overthinking it. It's magic – a man became a wolf but you're hung up on how big the wolf is?

"This is weird, this is so weird." I moan, ringing my hands as I close the distance between us. I hesitantly reach out towards him, sinking my fingers into his thick, downy fur. "Oh, you're really soft... I think this is the strangest thing that's ever happened to me."

The next thing I know, Sinclair has pounced, apparently no longer able to contain himself. He gently eases me to the ground despite the suddenness of his attack. He's standing over me then, licking my face and making me giggle and squeal as I try to push him away. Eventually he settles, laying his big head on my belly and pinning me to the floor. Soft purrs rumble in his chest, and I find myself sliding my hands back into his fur, massaging his head and ears and making him groan contentedly.

"You do know that if you crush this baby while it's still inside of me, you'll never get your

hair!" I complain, amazed at how heavy his furry snout is.

Instead of removing it, Sinclair nudges his cold nose up under the hem of my top, resting his soft muzzle against my bare belly and peering up at me with those wolfish eyes. The cloth of my shirt rests gently over his snout, and his heated breath dances over my tender breasts, traveling through the tented material and fluttering over my skin. "Dominic, that tickles!"

The wolf makes a sound that resembles a laugh, and the next thing I know, Sinclair is a man again, though his head is still under my top and he's kissing my belly. "All right you," he says after a moment, pulling me up to a sitting position. "Now how are you feeling, still nervous?"

"Yes." I admit, "though not about your wolf."

"You're ready for this, Ella." Sinclair encourages. "You're going to do beautifully. Just remember what I told you..."

"I know." I sigh. "Don't run when you catch me."

"Good girl." Sinclair praises, though he has no way of knowing the second half of this thought – the words still ringing in my head.

Unless I want you to run me down and make me yours. Unless I want you to claim me.

And now the only question is, will I be able to actually stop running when the time

Chapter 64 – Lydia Gate Crashes

Ella

When we arrive at the edge of the forest where the ceremony is set to begin, I'm wearing a shimmering pearl-colored dress, which looks as if it's been spun from pure moonlight. Its straps are so thin it doesn't seem like they should be strong enough to hold up the flowing fabric, which plunges between my breasts, hugs my waist and then cascades out into a wide skirt with a graceful train. It's completely inappropriate for the cold weather, but a cape of plush black furs billows down my back and Sinclair's cozy heat is warming my left side. My shoulders are heavy with the weight of his arm, and I feel thankful the rough forest terrain made wearing high heels impossible.

We move through the crowds of reporters and admirers, pausing for photos and handshakes but not answering any questions.

The press coverage from the moon bathing ritual was truly phenomenal, almost fawning in its analysis, and the crowds are getting bigger every day. Everyone seems to want to glimpse us for themselves, and I'm beginning to feel more like a museum attraction than a person.

It's hard to keep myself grounded when everyone around me is staring, jumping up and down yelling my name. This is business as usual for Sinclair, but I don't think I'll ever get used to it. I also don't know if I want my child subjected to all this attention. "It won't always be like this, right?" I ask, cradling my tiny baby bump as we move past the crowds. "Surely it's just the festival and how new our relationship is."

"Things will calm down." Sinclair agrees, his keen eyes not missing the way I try to shield our pup with my hands. "They'll be excited about the baby too, but they'll keep their distance. They know how protective new parents are, and as invasive as we can be about adult relationships, children are considered off limits."

"Good." I breathe, still frowning. "I don't like it, but I'll endure it as long as they leave the baby alone."

"After the campaign is over we can pull you out of the spotlight." Sinclair offers, "you'll be a new mother, it would be perfectly reasonable for your public presence to be diminished." Just then the wind shifts, and Sinclair scents the air, his muscles suddenly going very tense.

Right on cue, a snide voice sounds on our left, and a figure in white emerges from behind a tree. "What kind of Luna looks for excuses to get out of doing her job?" I don't need to look to recognize the speaker – her tone is completely altered from when she helped me in the bathroom, but there's no mistaking the nasal timbre of Lydia's voice.

Before I can even begin to process her words or get a good look at her, Sinclair pushes my body behind his, taking up a defensive stance between me and his ex-wife. “Are you really so desperate to force yourself in where you’re not wanted, that you’ve been reduced to skulking around like a fox, Lydia?” A murmur moves through the gathered shifters, and I suspect calling a wolf a fox is something of an insult. Though I, as someone who has always liked foxes, can’t help but feel a bit offended on their behalf.

“It certainly took you long enough to sense me.” She complains, sounding more than a little bitter. “Are you really so preoccupied with your little pet that your wolf can’t keep track of his surroundings?”

I’m trying to move back around in front of Sinclair, but he holds me fast, his arm reaching behind his body to lock me against him in an iron grip. I feel a little growl bubble up in my chest, only to be reduced to a trembling mess when he growls back, leaving no room for argument. “I guess that goes to show how little you mean to my wolf these days.” Sinclair counters smoothly. “He doesn’t even notice you when you’re right in front of him.”

I’m trying to peek around Sinclair’s burly arm, but I can only catch a flash of Lydia’s outraged expression before her venomous tongue is back at it, “Well you might not want me here, Sinclair, but as the only she-wolf who bears your mark, it’s my right to begin the hunt with you.”

My slow brain scrambles to catch up, and I gradually understand that she’s trying to take my place in the ceremony. She thinks that I don’t have the right to participate because Sinclair and I haven’t fully been mated, and suddenly I feel outraged myself.

How dare she try to take our place? How dare she try to take Sinclair from us? The little voice in my head is in a full on rage, and any logic I might have used to calm it – like the fact that Sinclair isn’t ours in the first place, so it’s impossible for him to be taken

– goes completely by the wayside.

I can’t recall ever feeling jealous or possessive about Mike. Heartbroken yes, but when I learned he was cheating I didn’t feel envy for Kate, only sorrow for myself and all those wasted years. But I feel jealous now. I feel a possessive fury unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. Something raw and primal is building up inside me, and I don’t know how to identify it or reign it in. Is this the pup too? Staking its claim on its father? Or have I lost my mind?

“You’re out of your head, Lyd–”

I surge forward, slipping out of Sinclair’s grasp by ducking underneath his arms and rounding his big body in a fit of righteous indignation. I can feel Sinclair reaching for me

again, but I pull myself up to my full height and shoot him a warning glare over my shoulder before giving Lydia the full force of my ire. “The only mark you bear is of the wolf you tricked into marrying you after you ran out on this pack. If you want to participate in the hunt, go home to him – or has he seen you for the snake you are and kicked you out?”

Lydia’s eyes flash, and I wonder if I’ve hit too close to home. I also wonder if her new husband might have realized the same thing she did – that Sinclair was never sterile, so their inability to conceive was probably a problem with her. Would an Alpha reject a mate that couldn’t give him pups? Is Lydia back here because she has nowhere else to go?

Stop empathizing! The voice in my head admonishes angrily, You can feel bad for her later, right now there’s a battle to win!

Who are you?! I cry in return. What battle? I’m not going to publicly humiliate a woman who’s struggling with fertility.

Struggling with fertility doesn’t mean she isn’t a conniving bitch. The voice replies. And she’s trying to take Sinclair. He’s mine.

Ours.

Before I can reply, Lydia snarls and I have to thrust a hand into Sinclair’s chest to keep him from throwing my body behind his once more. “Better the mark of another than no mark at all. You don’t even know what it truly means to be a mate.” She snaps.

I press my palm to my belly again, drawing her attention to my unborn pup. “What stronger claim could there be than this miracle? I don’t need Dominic’s mark to know I belong to him – and I’m willing to wait for it until we can do it right, in a manner befitting a King and Queen.” I declare, notching my chin up.

Lydia’s expression flickered when I mentioned the pup, and again I felt a rush of sympathy for the other woman, but her eyes hardened and blazed when I called myself a queen. The shifters around us are whispering and muttering among themselves, many glaring at Lydia and grinning at me. I know I’ve done well when Sinclair presses his body flush to mine, his hands circling my waist from behind to help me cradle our pup. A satisfied purr rumbles in his chest as his lips move against my ear, “the baby likes it when Mommy’s fierce.” He shares, and my heart flip flops over hearing myself called Mommy for the first time. “And so do I.” He praises.

Feeling a rush of confidence and an inexplicable knowing that I’m close to the kill, I continue, “And we both know that there are many more ways to claim a mate than with a bite.” I say with a sultry grin, sliding one hand up and around the back of Sinclair’s neck, encouraging his affection. I’ve never done anything so brazen in my life, except perhaps

the other night at the bonfire... or in that damned dream. At the same time, it feels completely right that we should be fighting this battle together, and showing off our attraction for all to see.

Lydia takes one furious step towards me, and Sinclair emits a snarl so vicious that everyone around us cowers, Lydia included.

I'm the only one able to withstand the force of his Alpha authority, which works well for our purposes. Since no one knows I'm human, they'll all assume I'm truly Sinclair's equal – in spirit if not brute strength.

Lydia shudders and whimpers before turning tail and fleeing in the opposite direction. For some reason, I feel the strangest urge to chase after her, but Sinclair is holding me too tightly. "Not so fast feisty pants, we have more important things to do than chase after bitter exes." I have to crane my neck to look up at him, but his face is full of pride and anticipation as he announces. "It's time."

Chapter 65 – The Hunt Begins

Ella

It's all come down to this.

My mind reels as I stare into the dark forest. For weeks I feel like Sinclair and I have been trapped in the same pattern: flirting, holding ourselves back, slipping up and falling in too deep, then retreating. It's felt like two steps forward and one step back, but the reality is that those one steps have gradually brought us closer to this point. The wild hunt feels like a turning point for our relationship – a critical test to decide whether we become lovers or stay friends – if that's what you can call us.

I know it's up to me to decide. For all his affection, compliments and terms of endearment, Sinclair has promised to follow my lead when it comes to taking things to the next level. I appreciate his restraint, but there's also a part of me that wants him to take the decision out of my hands. It's just one more impulse this pup has given me that I can't even begin to understand. I've never wanted anyone to decide anything for me in my entire life, yet here I am agonizing over my desire for a man I barely know, wishing I didn't have to be responsible for once in my life.

I think that's the problem. The temptation is so powerful that I want to throw caution to the wind, but I know better. I know so much better. So why am I still debating this?

Because it's Sinclair. He's different. He belongs to us. The little voice in my head encourages.

I don't know what drugs you've been taking, but you really need to get a hold of yourself. I counter, feeling more certain now that my conscience has demonstrated just how insane this pregnancy is making us.

This is temporary. It will pass when I give birth. I can't run around writing checks that my heart won't be able to cash in a few months. Focus on the pup, focus on the future.

I look around at the other participants in the ceremony: other she-wolves dressed in gowns like my own, their mates glued to them like velcro in anticipation of the hunt. I'm sure Sinclair and I looked much the same a few moments ago, but now I've stepped forward to begin the ritual. Ethereal music fills the air, a nearby orchestra playing instruments I've never before seen, as drums and singing voices raise towards the full moon. Gooseflesh raises on my chilled skin, and for the first time since this journey began, I understand what Aileen meant when she said shifters can feel the Goddess's magic. I'm probably just imagining it, like someone who believes they've taken drugs and therefore acts intoxicated, but I could swear the very air feels different tonight.

I feel different tonight.

I close my eyes and raise my face towards the heavens, letting the strange sensations grow. Is it crazy to think I can actually feel the moon on my skin, or that the electricity pulsing through my veins is not merely my own excitement, but something more?

I can feel Sinclair's eyes on me, and I glance back at him as one of the attendants hands me a blazing lantern. Sinclair looks as though he's barely holding it together. He's wearing a fur cape like my own, but underneath he's completely shirtless, sporting only sleek black trousers and bare feet. His green eyes are glowing through the darkness, and I can see his claws and fangs extended. His wolf must be right at the surface, and I remember what he told me about his power being strongest tonight.

I won't be myself. He'd warned me. I'm not sure if he's fully lost himself yet, but I can feel the power rolling off of him in heady waves, at least I imagine I can. It must be so much more intense for the actual shifters. I find myself shivering and turning away before the voice in my head can tell me to go steal a kiss or immediately flee. Instead I take a deep breath and set off into the darkness, starting slowly as the music builds. Hundreds of floating lanterns are released into the sky as I disappear into the forest, and as soon as I'm out of sight, I increase my speed.

Sinclair made me promise not to run once he's caught me, but he didn't say anything about beforehand. I've never been a runner, but tonight nothing sounds better than racing through the trees and feeling the cold winter wind on my skin. The deep snow makes it difficult, but the golden light of my lantern casts a warm glow on the dense evergreen trees, and I race forward without hesitation.

I've been running for about five minutes, amazed that I don't feel even a little bit winded, when a piercing howl shatters the air.

For one astonishing moment my body stops dead, trembling and quaking as Sinclair's wolf calls to me. The sound paralyzes me, no doubt giving him a head start as he takes up his pursuit, but once it's over I'm able to carry on. At this point a true she-wolf would abandon the lantern and clothing to shift, but Sinclair promised me no one would notice I don't. All the other wolves are much more concerned with their own hunts tonight, and they won't even enter the forest until Sinclair howls his victory once I'm caught.

I can still hear the distant music, and adrenaline and exhilaration flood my form as I continue running. I'm grinning so wide my cheeks hurt, and actually on the verge of giggling. Why haven't I ever run in the forest before? I had no idea what I was missing out on.

Sinclair howls again, and again I'm forced to stop until the shuddering need coursing through my body passes. This time I understand why I'm shivering and shaking this way, because the mere sound set my body alight. He might as well have been touching me,

bringing all of my neglected nerve endings to life the way only he can. I'm beginning to really dislike his howls. I can't let him catch me, if he keeps howling he'll catch me. It isn't fair. The voice in my head wines, throwing off the oppressive weight of his power to continue our flight.

Run, just run. I answer, not knowing where this is coming from. A few minutes ago I was determined to let Sinclair catch me, but now that seems impossible. It's not even an option. I don't want to be caught. I just want to keep running like this forever. I've never felt so free.

Who is Sinclair to stop us? My conscience inquires. He's not the boss of us, I'm never going to stop running and I don't care what he says.

Yes. I think in agreement. You're right, you're so right. We're never going to stop.

Another howl breaks the air, and I prepare myself to halt and battle the call, but for some reason my body doesn't respond this time. It's as if the third howl has no impact on me at all. Surely I haven't become immune? Am I so far away now that it can't affect me? That doesn't make any sense, he's ten times faster than I am – he's got to be closing the distance with every minute.

I'm still pondering this when I hear a distant growl, and it occurs to me that the third howl was a higher pitch than the first two. Is that supposed to mean something? Is he closing in on me? Was that the victory howl?

I cock my ears to the forest behind me, and sure enough I hear more than just music and owl songs. I expect the steady loping of a gargantuan wolf, but the air is muddled with too many noises – distant snarls and strange crashes, whimpers and whines. I thought the others wouldn't start the hunt until our part was finished? I think, a bolt of fear slicing through me. And that doesn't sound like sex.

In my periphery I think I glimpse a flash of movement, but then an identical flash happens on my other side. I start to whip my head back and forth, trying to get a hold of what I saw. Unfortunately I can't do this and keep my eyes on the path in front of me. I have to choose: look for dangers in my surroundings, or make sure I have an escape route.

The voice in my head isn't just urging me to run for fun now, but with the understanding that something is very wrong here.

Finally I hear the steady thud of a wolf on my trail, his paws crashing and crunching in the dense snow much more swiftly than my own clumsy feet.

But when another howl sounds in the distance, once that does nothing to summon my

desire but seems to scream at me to run for my life, I realize: The wolf behind me isn't Sinclair, and he isn't alone.

Chapter 66 – The Hunter Becomes the Hunted

Ella

When I realized I was being chased, I threw off my cape and veered off in another direction, hoping that the wolves weren't close enough to see me yet. If I'm lucky maybe I can throw them off my trail, if only for a moment. I throw down the lantern too. The moonlight is so bright that I can see the forest well enough, and the snow is so deep that I don't have to worry about trodding on rocks or sticks.

I take up the skirts of my dress in both hands, running as fast as I can – faster than I've ever run before. I see a narrow creek on my right, a steady stream of water flowing along the banks, releasing steam into the air. I realize the stream must be thermal, like the pools around the stone circle. I momentarily debate jumping into the waters, both craving the warmth and knowing the water will disguise my scent.

But what if I have to get back out into the snow? I fret. I could die from hypothermia faster than the wolves could catch me.

I don't think so. The voice in my head answers. The wolves will catch you first unless you find a way to throw them off. It's not even like you can climb a tree – they can shift and climb true.

You better be right about this. I moan internally, jumping down into the streambed. The water comes up to my waist, and warmth quickly seeps through my dress. I dive beneath the surface, knowing I'll be faster swimming than running. I don't pause to try and track my pursuers, I simply go as fast as I can, praying this crazy plan will have worked – praying that Sinclair is out there somewhere, coming to help me.

I hate being dependent on anyone else and I hate feeling helpless, but I know that's exactly what I am in this situation. I'm at the mercy of these wolves and Sinclair's swiftness, and that would hurt badly enough even without knowing my weakness is threatening my baby's life as well.

I swim until the water becomes too shallow, jumping back into the snow and taking off again. I hear a roar behind me, and I know I've failed. I didn't throw them off at all, I probably just kept them at bay a while. I scan the forest ahead of me, searching for anything that might help me. Belatedly I realize I should have kept my lantern and set the bastards on fire, but then hindsight is always 20/20.

Cursing myself, I zero in on some boulders, catching sight of a narrow crevice between the huge stones. I know it's my only chance. For once being tiny might help me, but only if the wolves aren't strong enough to break through rock. A month ago I would have thought this was a given, but now I'm not so sure.

I wedge my way into the crevice just in time, for now sooner have I wriggled into the tight space that a huge weight crashes into the rock. Snarls and growls surround me, and clawed paws begin scrabbling at the opening in the rocks, trying to make purchase on my skin and drag me out.

The only piece of dignity I can boast is that I don't wet myself, but I certainly whimper and whine like a baby. I'm sobbing with terror, wishing I'd never agreed to this stupid ritual.

This isn't the first time I've thought I was going to die, but this time it matters a lot more. This time it won't only be my life that's lost. I might be able to come to terms with my own end, but I can't bear the thought of my baby dying before it's even had the chance to be born.

"Please," I pray, knowing the Goddess probably won't care about me, but hoping she'll care about my son. "Please help us."

Sinclair

She's running. My wolf howls with delight.

Of course she's running. I think amusedly, That's the whole point.

No, I mean she's not going to stop. My wolf clarifies, loping around in my head. Mine, she's finally mine!

It's taken all my willpower to wait the full five minutes to give my mischievous little human her head start, and as I prepare to shift, I wonder if my wolf knows something I don't. Surely he's just getting ahead of himself. We won't know what Ella decides until we catch up to her, but he seems to think this is a done deal.

I'd known there was a chance Ella would disobey my instructions and run from me tonight, and my inner wolf had certainly prayed she'd give me the excuse to finally make her mine, but I still feel anxious about the situation. I'd much rather take Ella to bed when I'm in full control, and I know as soon as I shift that will be out the window. At the same time, I warned Ella – I did my part and left the decision in her hands.

I know my reluctance and worry will disappear as soon as I give my wolf free reign, so I give him one last order before transforming. We have to be gentle.

He snarls in reply, as if affronted I might think he'd forget. After all, his job is just to catch her, all the rest comes after I've shifted back again. Even so, I know from experience

that the haze of the solstice leaves him largely in control, and I won't take any risks

– not with Ella.

With a sudden blur and a loud crack, I transform, only pausing to howl before I take off into the night. The howl is mostly for show

– Ella might hear it, but she won't feel it the way a she-wolf does. She won't be temporarily frozen in place, struggling to fight my power over her, my demand that she answer my call. She won't understand that this is her first chance to submit, that raising her own voice into the air would be to accept me as her mate even before I've caught her.

I pick up Ella's scent and her tracks instantly, a thrill of excitement pulsing through my body as I think about everything I'm going to do once I've caught her. Will she protect herself like she should and stop running, or will she provoke me? Does she want to be with me as badly as I want to be with her? Will her base instincts make her surrender to lust, despite her humanity? Either way I'm going to take her home and spoil her rotten for doing so well with Lydia tonight, but the real question is how much fun we get to have first.

With the magic in the air tonight, I wonder why we've been fighting this so hard. I know all the reasons of course, but under the moon and the stars they all seem so silly. I don't care that Ella isn't a wolf, and I don't care that we've started out on a lie. I just want her.

I howl again, but soon after I catch the scent of other wolves; wolves that shouldn't be anywhere near these forests, especially not tonight. I immediately recognize one, remembering his scent from the alley behind the club where Ella was attacked. My wolf snarls at the mere memory and as much as I want to attack, I have to figure out how many there are, as well as where they're located.

I scent the air again, cocking my ears for more sounds and scanning the dense trees. Fury and fear crash into me when I realize there are at least half a dozen wolves in the woods with Ella and I, and that can only mean one thing: The Prince has chosen the hunt to make his next assassination attempt, only this time, I think he's targeting Ella and I both.

There are four rogues tracking me, but the other two are far ahead. I know instinctively that they've gone after Ella. They must have been in the forest waiting for us already, and now my sweet human and my pup might pay the price for my distraction.

Maybe Lydia was right – I've been so caught up in her that I've gotten sloppy.

Or maybe Linda was part of it – she certainly helped distract you. My wolf suggests

viciously.

She might be conniving, but I don't believe that of her. After all, if I'm dead she can't be queen. And in all honesty, the failure would still be mine even if she was plotting against me. Like it or not, I've missed threats brewing right under my nose. It's the canal attack all over again, only this time it's a thousand times worse. I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to Ella and the baby – never!

I have to decide quickly. Do I dispatch the wolves nearest to me so I can run down Ella's attackers without added risk, or do I go straight to Ella and face them all at once. Four is certainly easier to defeat than six, but even one wolf against Ella is too much. I have to reach her before they can harm her. If I pause to fight my own attackers, they could easily kill her.

Unfortunately the rogues seem to understand this too. I'm sprinting ahead, racing towards Ella with every bit of strength and endurance I possess, when a huge red wolf barrels into me from the side.

Chapter 67 – Finding Ella

Sinclair

The rogues aren't as smart as they think they are. Their only chance would have been to attack me all at once. Instead they try to lunge at me two at a time, giving each other time to rest and rebound in between attacks. At first – the first five seconds that is

– it works. The red wolf crashes into my side while a big gray beta slams into my right. Then the other two charge me, but as soon as I've seen what they're about – I adapt.

The next time a wolf lunges for me I meet him head on, snatching his neck between my jaws and violently ripping into him with my fangs. As soon as he falls I turn on the other, slashing at the other wolves with my front and hind legs while my mouth rips the next attacker limb from limb. I've tasted their blood now, and my worry for Ella and the baby is growing stronger with every moment that passes.

These four would have been outmatched with me on a good day, but the Prince was an idiot to send them on the Solstice, and he was certainly a fool to have them attack my mate at the same time. Normal wolves can do extraordinary things to protect their families – and I'm no ordinary wolf.

Within minutes their bodies are scattered around me, and I don't feel the slightest bit of remorse for killing them. These wolves are probably some of the same ones responsible for the attack at the canal, and while I might forgive an attack on me, I will never forgive an attack on my pack or the woman they believe is my mate.

Even if I was in a forgiving mood, I can't afford to let them get word back to the Prince. The wolves after Ella will know she hasn't shifted and they probably already communicated that with their friends. They'll realize that Ella isn't truly a she-wolf, and that secret is certainly going to die with them.

I sprint through the forest towards Ella and the other rogues. When I find Ella's abandoned coat and realize she's tried to lay a false trail I'm impressed, and when I realize she's gone into the stream I'm both proud and terrified. I can hear snarling in the distance, which means she's still alive. But how long has she been out of the water, and what have they done to her?

Finally I reach the boulders where Ella has taken refuge. The rogues are so busy clawing impotently at the rocks that they don't even notice my arrival. I thought I would be relieved to find Ella alive – and I am – but nothing prepared me for the primal fury I would feel actually seeing these wolves go after my sweet little human. The sounds of her cries egg me on, making me roar out my wrath so that the bastards will get away from her.

My vision turns to a red haze, and I don't even remember killing the rogues. One moment there's nothing but the blood roaring in my ears and the taste of blood on my fangs, and the next I'm opening my eyes to a scene of utter carnage. I can't recall ever inflicting so much damage on an enemy, I've literally torn them to shreds, and only too late do I consider that Ella will have just listened to all of that.

She's still whimpering and crying, and I can hear her teeth chattering as well. Cursing myself, I shift back into my human form and use some snow to wash the blood from my face and limbs. Trying to shake off the violence, I go to kneel in front of the tiny cave into which Ella has forced herself. "Ella?"

A small whine meets my ears, and I try to steady my heaving breath. "It's alright, little one." I promise. "They're gone. They can't hurt you."

I listen for sounds of movement, and I remember the way she went into shock after the first attack. My Goddess, I think bitterly.

Only a month together and there's already been more than one attack. Some protector I am.

"Can you come out to me, Ella?" I ask gently, wishing I could force my way in there with her. I can smell her blood, though it isn't as strong as the rogue's. Of course, that's not saying much, all the blood that was once inside them is now out, but it doesn't smell like Ella is bleeding badly.

Yet she doesn't move, and fresh panic lances through me – she could have broken bones or frostbite and I wouldn't smell a thing. "Are you hurt? How long have you been out of the water?"

Still there's nothing, and I'm becoming increasingly afraid I'm going to have to break through the rocks to reach her. I begin to purr, hoping this will break through her shock enough to lure her out of hiding. "You did so well evading them and finding a hiding place, sweetheart." I praise. "You gave me time to reach you, but now you have to help me and come out so I can take care of you."

Bending down, I peer into the crevice, wondering if she might take my hand and let me pull her out. When I finally see her, however, I know she isn't in any state to help me. Her beautiful eyes are clenched tightly shut, tears streaming down her cheeks as she clamps her hands over her ears, rocking back and forth in the small space. I doubt she can hear me, and I have a feeling she wouldn't see me even if she opened her eyes.

Ella's arms are covered in defensive wounds where she must have been shielding herself from the attacker's arms reaching in after her, and I immediately know reaching in myself will only frighten her more. I purr more loudly, and Ella's body seems to jolt, but

just as quickly she doubles down, as if she's trying to block out the sensations – as if she doesn't trust them. I never knew my heart could break just having someone refuse my comfort, but not being able to reach Ella now, when she needs me most, hurts more than I could have imagined.

“Okay, baby.” I decide, wishing there was any other way, “I wish I could let you stay here until you're ready to come out, but it's too cold.” I sigh. “I'm going to have to break through the rocks.”

I know she can't hear me, but I continue talking to her in the hopes that she might come back to herself and understand.

She doesn't.

Instead I place both of my hands on either side of the break in the boulders, and I summon all of my strength to force them apart.

It doesn't happen immediately, but I think of Ella and our baby being trapped in these rocks forever, and I channel all of my power into destroying her makeshift fortress. A thunderous crack fills the air as they split in two, and I snatch Ella out of the cave before any sediment can fall on her.

The moment I lay a hand on Ella her eye's snap open, but there's no recognition in her brilliant irises. Instead sharp, acrid fear pours out of her, and she thrashes against my hold, trying to break free. I wrap my arms tightly around her small body, but Ella fights me like a wildcat, kicking, hitting, scratching and biting for all she's worth. It's amazing how difficult it is to keep hold of her, and if it weren't so horrible I would be proud of the fight she's putting up.

“Shhh, Ella, it's alright. You're safe. You're safe now.” However her sightless eyes and desperate cries make me think this isn't the first time she's fought this way, and I find myself holding back tears as I finally dig my fingers into a pressure point at the base of her throat, stealing her consciousness.

Little by little, Ella fades into a forced sleep, her body finally going limp in my arms. When it's over I slump onto the ground, gathering her precious form in my lap and pressing my hand to her belly. Our babe is whole and unharmed, but severely distressed. I try to send waves of comfort through our bond, beginning to purr again, but I think he can feel my own guilt and misery. He settles slightly, but pulses of anxiety continue to surge through our bond, as well as flashes of the fear and anguish Ella felt during the attack.

I don't stay there long, too worried about Ella catching hypothermia to give into my own body's demands for rest. However for the moment that I do remain, I wonder how it ever

came to this: Naked, slumped on the ground surrounded by dead bodies, cradling the mother of my child in my arms and weeping my apologies into her neck.

I have to get her home. I have to make sure she's alright. But as soon as I know Ella and the baby are okay, I'm going to find and kill the person responsible for this.

Chapter 68 – Aftermath

Sinclair

“Dominic?” My beta, Hugo, stands behind me, watching me with a worried expression. “We need you in the war room.”

“I want to be here when she wakes up.” I insist, keeping my gaze locked on Ella. She’s asleep in my bed, her small body curled beneath the covers. Her arms are bandaged from shoulder to fingertip, and bruises dot her fair skin in too many places to count.

Guilt ties my insides into knots just looking at them – some of those bruises were my doing, the results of my efforts to restrain her. Ella had remained unconscious as I carried her out of the forest, but when she woke, she fought me as hard as ever. The doctor was forced to give her a strong dose of a sleeping draft in order to treat her wounds, though he promised the potion would help break her shock.

“I understand, but we’re still cleaning up the scene and we need to make sure no one finds out about this.” Hugo sighs. It was thanks to Ella’s quick thinking and endurance that the attack happened so deep in the forest, far deeper than other couples would be running on the hunt.

I was able to evacuate her on the opposite side of the park, free from the prying eyes of the pack or the media, and my men had immediately rushed in to clean up the bodies before they could be discovered. “Until we can prove the prince was behind it, rogue attacks will just make you look weak.”

“I am weak.” I state hoarsely, wallowing in more than a small amount of self-pity and loathing. “It’s my fault. I didn’t see them coming. I knew the Prince was plotting against us and I still didn’t see them coming.”

“That isn’t fair Dom.” Hugo growls, his voice very stern. “You can only prepare for so much and none of us can foresee the future.”

I’m sure Ella doesn’t blame you.”

“Well she should.” I bite back, emotion clogging my throat. “You know, she was so traumatized she couldn’t even recognize me?”

That our baby was beside itself after weathering all her fear?”

“I know.” Hugo confirms grimly. “But she’s heavily sedated. It will be some time before she wakes, and if you want to make her safe, then the best thing you can do for her is to come to the war room and deal with the fallout. Help us strategize against the Prince. We’ll place extra guards at her door.”

“Not at her door.” I correct, seeing the sense of his words even though I hate hearing logic at the moment. “I want them posted in here with her. And I’ll come to the war room, but there’s something I have to do first.”

“Dominic –”

“If anyone has an inside track on the Prince’s plans, it’s my brother.” I interrupt, scrubbing a hand over my face. “We need intel if we’re going to effectively strategize – and he has it.”

“Alright.” Hugo agrees. “Just try not to lose your temper. Murdering your brother isn’t the kind of PR we need right now.”

I huff a humorless laugh, “Spoil sport.”

The sun is rising over the mountains as I pull into Roger’s driveway, taking measured breaths and conducting silent counting exercises to try and stay calm. In my current mood it wouldn’t take much provocation for me to kill anyone who crosses my path, and Roger is more infuriating than most.

I slide from the car and stride up the garden path, urging my wolf to settle. No violence. Violence is bad. Just think how disappointed Ella would be. I know it’s ironic that I’m urging myself not to resort to violence after the slaughter I committed last night, but that was different. I didn’t have a choice then – I do now.

The door swings open soon after I knock, and Roger’s surprised face appears. He looks so genuinely shocked to see me, I actually contemplate whether he might not have been involved in the attack. Then again, my brother has always been a good actor.

“Dominic, to what do I owe the pleasure?” He drawls, making it clear that my visit is anything but pleasurable.

I push past him, knocking into his shoulder and forcing him back from the doorway as I go. “Were you involved?” I demand, my voice little more than a growl, “Did you know what he was planning?”

Roger blinks, “what are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Roger.” I scowl, “I know you’ve been working with the Prince.”

He offers me a humorless laugh. “You’re being paranoid, Dom.”

“Bull,” I snap, “You expect me to believe you just happened to turn up in the same back alley where Ella was being attacked in the middle of the night by coincidence? Or that the Prince mysteriously discovered I haven’t claimed Ella when you’re the only person who has that information?”

“I think you’re forgetting all your staff – your guards, your doctors, Hugo and Aileen.” Roger counters smoothly.

“My people are loyal – you are the only person who knew who also has a vendetta against me.” I combat.

“That you know of.” He intones ominously.

“Ella was almost killed last night.” I thunder, “I understand you hating me, but how could you be so cruel to an innocent she-wolf!”

“Wait,” Roger protests, visibly paling. “Back up, what happened last night?”

“Stop pretending you don’t know!” The words burst from my chest in a vicious snarl, and I just barely hold onto my temper. Use your words Dominic! “I suppose you ran in to protect her the first time to try and earn her trust, but when that didn’t work you decided to just sacrifice her to the rogues.”

“I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about!” Roger shouts back, losing his own temper. “On my life, Dominic, I had no idea there had been a second attack!”

“Why should I believe you?” I grumble, clenching and unclenching my fists.

Roger raises his hands, his mouth a thin line. To my surprise, he seems genuinely shaken, and I wonder if I underestimated his interest in Ella. “Look, I admit I knew about the first attack in advance. The Prince planned on killing her outright, but I thought saving her might get me some leverage with her. I... I thought if she trusted me I could convince her to leave you.”

“What, so you could have her for yourself?” I bite, fighting the urge to reel back. I’ve never known Roger to admit any of his misdeeds. He must truly like Ella.

“No.” Roger rolls his eyes, “Just so you would lose the campaign. And yes, I told the Prince she hadn’t been claimed, but I swear on my life, I was never going to let him hurt her. I didn’t know about last night.”

“Do you really despise me so much?” I grind out, “That you would rather a tyrant take over the realm just to spite me? Do you have no concept of the damage he’ll do if he

wins? The atrocities he'll inflict?"

Roger's face closes off, and I wonder if he truly was so blinded by his resentment of me that he never considered the consequences of his schemes. "I just wanted to hurt you Dom. I admit I was being selfish."

"Well I've got news for you," I declare ferociously. "I plan on winning this campaign, and you can be with me or against me. But you need to decide, because if you continue to make yourself my enemy, I'm going to treat you as complicit to the Prince's crimes." Pacing I let my wolf flash in my eyes. "Further, if anything happens to Ella I will hold you personally responsible – and I'm not talking exile, brother."

"Is she okay?" He gulps.

"Physically, she'll heal." I respond, trying to keep the emotional from my voice. "I'm not so sure if she'll be okay mentally."

He flinches, and I wonder if he really does care for her. "Are you going to tell her what I did?"

"I should." I answer gruffly, "But she's been through enough already." I start to turn away, before changing my mind and whirling back to face him, "You know she actually defended you to me? She feels for you, even though you've done nothing but try to hurt and manipulate her."

Roger's face draws tight, and I see a glimmer of something akin to shame on his features. "I didn't know."

"That's how good she is. She'd be your ally if you let her." I explain, "And instead you chose to terrorize her."

"I'm sorry." Roger professes, ashen-faced. "I know she's good. I saw that in her from the beginning. I think that's part of why I was so angry when you found her. You don't deserve someone so pure."

"It's not my fault I was born stronger, Roger!" I state simply, disgusted at how broken our relationship has become over things that are not my fault. "Or that Mom sacrificed herself for me."

He clears his throat, looking down at the ground. "It felt better, to blame you..." He confesses slowly, "Than to believe it was all for nothing."

I'm both grief stricken and amazed to hear him speak this way. We've never connected like this before, and I know Ella is the reason we are now. "Well if you want to make it up

to us, you can go back to the Prince and find out what he's planning next."

Roger raises his chin, looking thoughtful. "You want me to be a double agent?"

"It's not about what I want. It's about whether you want to let a madman take over the Kingdom. It's about whether you want Ella and your nephew to live or die."

"Alright." He nods. "I'll do it."

Chapter 69 – Sinclair Calls In an Expert

Sinclair

It's mid-morning by the time I leave Roger's house, and I dial Cora's phone number, both because she needs to know about what happened, and because I need help caring for Ella. Despite the doctor's promises, I'm worried that Ella won't recover as quickly as he's predicting and if anyone knows what to expect, her sister surely must.

"Mr Sinclair?" She sounds uncertain as she answers, as if she suspects her caller ID might be lying to her.

"Good morning, Cora." I greet her, taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry to disturb you when you're at work, but I'm calling with some bad news."

I can feel the anxiety in her sharp intake of breath, and worry imbues her soft voice, "Is Ella okay? Is the baby?"

"They're both at home resting." I share, hoping this will assuage the worst of her fears. "But there was another attack last night."

"Another one?" Cora squeaks, indignation bleeding into her voice as she continues. "I thought you were supposed to be this all powerful Alpha? You're supposed to be keeping her safe! My sister has known you for a month and she's already had people trying to kill her twice!"

I understand her outrage, and I agree with it completely. "I know. You have every right to be upset with me. I'm not very happy with myself right now... I failed her." I confess, exhaling heavily. "I'm not turning out to be a very good father so far."

"I..." Cora doesn't seem to know what to make of this. "Tsk," She clears her throat. "Well is she alright? Does she need anything?"

"She's a bit scraped up, but I'm afraid the worst damage was psychological. It wasn't like last time. She... she didn't recognize me afterwards." I wonder if the human can hear how upsetting I find this particular detail, but when she remains silent I forge on.

"She's in a deep state of shock – the doctor used the word dissociative, like she completely disconnected from her body to protect her mind."

Cora swears, but she doesn't sound surprised. "I'll leave work right now." She offers, "I can be there within a half hour."

"Wait." I advise, "She's been sedated and I'm not sure when she'll wake up." For a moment I debate whether or not I should voice my next thought. Ella hasn't spoken to

me much about her childhood, but I know that she feels very protective of her sister.

Moreover, I remember the way she acted after the attack in the alley, refusing to show her upset to Cora, insisting she was fine.

“And... I don’t want to sound insensitive because I know you love Ella and want to be with her, but I’m afraid if you’re there she’ll be so focused on not worrying you, that she’ll try to pretend like nothing happened and ignore her own wellbeing.”

Cora thinks about this for a minute. “You’re probably right about that. Ella has always been the caretaker... she really doesn’t know how to deal with having the tables turned on her.”

“So I’ve learned.” I muse aloud. “So I think it would be best to give it a couple of days.”

“Alright.” Cora agrees, “But I can still help you. I know all her creature comforts, the things that soothe her best. I can send you a list.”

“That would be wonderful.” I express honestly, thankful I decided to make this call before Ella wakes. By the time she returns to consciousness I can have all her favorite things already on hand and ready to comfort her.

“But Sinclair –” Cora interrupts my thoughts.

“Please call me Dominic, Cora.” I correct gently.

“Dominic,” She repeats patiently. “It’s not my place to tell you the details... but I think you should know,”

“Yes?” I prompt her, having a dreadful premonition that I don’t want to hear whatever it is she’s about to say.

“These attacks aren’t the first traumas Ella has endured at the hands of men.” She explains vaguely, and I both want to demand further explanations and forbid her from saying more. “She went through a lot when we were still children... she endured some of it to protect me and the other kids.” Cora trails off for a moment, sounding positively miserable. My mind immediately floods with horrible images of Ella, even more sweet and innocent than she is now, suffering at the hands of the adults meant to care for her.

“You need to be prepared that she won’t just be dealing with the trauma of the attacks when she wakes – but all the bad memories they’ll have dredged up.”

“That’s why you weren’t surprised... when I told you she dissociated.” I guess, hating every word of this conversation. “You’ve seen this before.”

“Yes.” Cora confirms, sounding remorseful. “But you’re not wrong either. She wants to protect the people she cares about even when she’s in no state to do so.”

Something we have in common. I think bitterly.

“I suppose it’s two sides of the same coin.” I say instead. “Whether she’s doing it to protect herself from the pain or put on a brave face for someone else, it’s still repressing the bad feelings.”

“Oh.” Cora murmurs, in the tone of someone having an epiphany.

“What?” I inquire, not liking this one bit.

“Well when you put it that way... I wonder if maybe we’re wrong about it being for someone else.” Cora shares. “I mean maybe that’s how it started, but at the end of the day it still means she never learned how to cope with these things.”

A wave of understanding crashes into me. If Ella has only ever repressed the bad things in her life, it won’t matter if her sister is there or not, she’ll try to do the same with this – because it’s all she knows. Only now do I realize that Ella didn’t just pretend she was fine with Cora after the first attack. She might have come to me for safety, but she was a hollow shell as I tended her wounds, and when I encouraged her to share her feelings she distracted me with an argument. She never even cried about the attack, only my deception.

Ffuucckk. I think, furious with myself for missing this, for letting the wiley minx outwit me.

“So what do I do?” I ask, hoping Cora will have the answer.

“Well I’ve never been able to refuse Ella anything when she’s hurting.” Cora remarks, sounding disheartened, “Especially not when it’s my fault. Which means I’ve never called out her avoidance, I’ve just... well, I think I’ve enabled her – letting her tell me what she wants and never questioning or pushing back on whether it’s healthy.”

It seems like Cora and I have more in common than I realized. It also seems she’s sharper than I gave her credit for, as I’m receiving her message loud and clear. I might be blaming myself for putting Ella in danger, but I can’t let that guilt me into coddling her. “But you’re an Alpha.” She elaborates. “So maybe you’ll be able to do what I never could – and not let her get away with pretending everything is fine.”

“You can count on it.” I nod, taking this mission to heart. Ella is my responsibility, and it’s in my blood to take care of my pack.

She might be human, but Ella is pack now, and I know her in some ways her sister certainly doesn't. I also know a thing or two about helping stubborn she-wolves find catharsis – and from what I've seen, Ella will be no different.

"Thank you for telling me, Cora." I profess genuinely. "And thank you for the advice. I'll call you as soon as Ella is ready for visitors."

"Good luck." Cora offers, "and just let me know if you need anything else."

"I will." Hanging up, I realize that talking with Ella's sister has completely changed my expectations for what the next few hours hold. I was prepared for Ella to wake up in another fog or to come home to a basket case, but if the doctor is right and she's lucid

– I'll probably be dealing with one very obstinate little human in total denial.

When Cora's email hits my inbox, listing out all of Ella's favorite foods, music, films, and amenities, I make a detour to the store.

Stocking up on candles, essential oils, bubble bath, fancy scrubs and masks, dark chocolate, flowers and various groceries, I plan out exactly how I'll set up my rooms once I get home. I'm hoping I can get everything done before Ella wakes, and also praying we're wrong about Ella's propensity to bury her traumas.

However I know my prayers haven't been answered as soon as I walk into my rooms and discover that Ella is not only wide awake, but standing in the middle of the room instructing her dressmaker to sew sleeves onto her ballgown to cover her bandages. In the midst of all the excitement I actually forgot the masquerade was tonight – but Ella, it seems, did not.

She smiles at me in greeting, but I can only glare in return. "What in the Goddess's name do you think you're doing?"

Chapter 70 – Ella Loses her Temper

Ella

I woke up in a thick haze of confusion, feeling as though I've been run over by a truck, but not remembering why. Muscles I didn't even know I possessed are screaming at me, demanding ice packs and pain killers, and I have a thumping headache. For a moment I wonder if I somehow have a hangover, recalling the groggy morning afters I used to experience following nights out on the town.

Slowly the memories trickled in: the wild hunt taking a horrible turn; the rogue wolves chasing me in the forest; my near scrape with hypothermia; and fighting for my life while knowing it will all be over once they catch me. When I reach the point where I'm reliving being trapped in the boulders, feeling their claws ripping into my skin as I try to hold them off, I rush to the bathroom.

Emptying my stomach into the toilet for reasons that have nothing to do with my pregnancy and everything to do with the sheer terror I feel, I collapse on the tiles and try to force the horrible memories from my brain.

Other unwelcome images crowd into my thoughts even as I struggle to bury this most recent horror, ghosts from my past seeing an opportunity to rear their terrible heads. Breathing deeply, I force them back into the iron safe in the back of my mind, shoving the memories of last night inside with them. It isn't easy, but I'm well practiced at stowing unpleasant things away like this, protecting myself from their torment. When the work is done, I feel dazed and numb, but that's better than wallowing in agony.

Pulling myself up off the floor, I study my bandaged arms in the mirror, realizing they'll clash with my ball gown's off-the-shoulder cut. I call the dressmaker first thing, asking her to hurry to my side. The morning papers tell me that the bloody events of my first wild hunt went undetected from the media and the general public, but today is the Solstice itself – it's more important than ever that Sinclair and I make a strong showing.

The dressmaker arrives shortly, surprising my guards – who apparently didn't realize I was awake. She suggests tight-fitted sleeves the same color as my flesh, to disguise my bandages without compromising the gown's design, and also offers to sew me a pair of matching gloves to help hide my injuries. I agree and she quickly makes the adjustments. By early afternoon the gown is complete, and I'm standing in front of the mirror studying the effect.

When Sinclair barges in halfway through the fitting, I'm expecting him to compliment my quick thinking. I smile at him, feeling proud of my efforts, but he only glares. "What in the Goddess's name do you think you're doing?"

His growling voice sends a shiver down my spine, but I summon a soft chuckle. "Well I

can't very well go to the ball looking like a mummy." I answer, nodding towards my white bandages.

Sinclair stalks forward, dismissing the dressmaker with a curt "Leave us." Once the door closes behind her, he bears down on me, towering above me with a foreboding expression on his handsome face. "Ella you're not going to the ball."

"I'm sorry, are you auditioning to be my evil step mother?" I quip, astonished by his apparent anger.

"This isn't a joke." Sinclair informs me sternly. "A few hours ago you were bloody catatonic."

"I'm better now." I shrug, turning back to the mirror and pretending I don't see his thunderstruck expression. "I felt a bit groggy from all the doctor's drugs at first, but that passed ages ago."

Sinclair shakes his head, muttering in something akin to disbelief. "Goddess, Cora was right."

"Right about wh—" I begin, processing his words too late. As soon as I do I turn on him, understanding slamming into me. "You called Cora? You told her? Why would you do that?!"

"Because she's your sister, she loves you and she had a right to know you were hurt." He declares, turning me back towards the mirror and unzipping my gown. I try to wrench away from him but it doesn't work.

"Dominic stop!" I insist, backing out of his reach and clutching the garment to my chest. "You should have talked to me before calling Cora. It wasn't necessary to upset her."

"At least one of you is upset!" He exclaims, baffling me completely.

"What on earth is wrong with you?" I demand, feeling my annoyance devolve into outrage. "Why are you being like this?"

"Well to start with, the mother of my pup was almost killed last night but you're pretending like nothing happened!" Sinclair bursts.

I feel a familiar rush of disappointment to be reduced to 'the mother of his pup', but I'm not surprised.

"I'm not denying it happened," I correct him simply. "But it wasn't a big deal. You're fine, I'm fine. It was scary in the moment but it all turned out okay."

I can see Sinclair wants to reach for me, to grab me and turn me to face him, but he's obviously wary of touching my wounds.

Instead he circles in front of me, again imposing on my personal space with his big body. "Ella nothing about this situation is okay!" He asserts firmly, searching my face for signs that his words are sinking in and becoming even more upset when they don't. "And I don't believe for one second that you are as unaffected by all this as you're pretending."

"I'm not pretending." I insist. "I know you think I'm this fragile thing, but I'm not, Dominic."

He sighs, wearing the beleaguered expression of someone at his wits end. "It isn't fragile or weak to be affected by a near death experience, Ella."

"I know that." I inform him stubbornly, "That isn't what I meant, just that you want me to behave according to your expectations..."

but everyone handles trauma differently."

"Well if I thought you were handling it, I wouldn't care what method you chose." Sinclair grumbles. "What bothers me is seeing you ignore it."

"So what, you want me to be upset?" I inquire, aghast. "Why, so you can rush in and play the hero?"

"Of course I don't want you to be upset!" He rumbles, catching my waist. "But I also don't want you hurting yourself by repressing your feelings. These things don't just go away, Ella, if you don't let them out they fester and grow toxic inside of you."

I notch my chin up, my own blood beginning to boil now. "I have the rest of my life to process what happened, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let the Prince win this campaign. Don't you think he wants us to stay home and lick our wounds?" I demand, surprising myself with the force of my convictions.

I want to convince Sinclair not to coddle me, but I also want to make the Prince pay for trying to harm my unborn child. "He shouldn't get away with what he did last night! I don't care what he does to me, but I won't stand for him trying to kill our baby."

"Well you should care what he does to you!" Sinclair explodes, pacing in front of me and looking as though he can't decide whether to be annoyed or impressed with my defiance. "And your wellbeing is more important than showing him up."

"That's your opinion." I hiss, crossing my arms over my chest. "I disagree."

Sinclair narrows his eyes, pulling my body flush against his and letting me feel the full weight of his disapproval. “We’re not going to the ball, Ella.” He declares, his fingers digging into my tender flesh. “We’re going to talk about this whether you like it or not.”

“You can’t make me.” I combat, my lip curling with disdain, “And I don’t need you to make me feel better, because I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t.” Sinclair insists, seeming resigned but determined as he looms over me. “I know, because I’m not and it didn’t even happen to me.”

“Just stop it!” I shout, fighting back tears. Why won’t he let this go? Why won’t he just let me deal with it in my own way? I can feel myself spiraling out of control. I can feel the bad feelings hammering against the locked door in my mind, encouraged by Sinclair’s warmth and understanding. Something inside me wants to cave to his dominance, but I can’t let that happen. I can’t release all that darkness – it will swallow me whole. “I’ve made up my mind!”

“Have you even cried, Ella?” Sinclair continues, stalking me across the room. “Have you let yourself feel what they did to you?”

“I said stop it!” I repeat, pushing at his broad chest, “Just leave me alone!”

“I’m not going to do that, baby.” He states gravely, continuing to pursue me.

“Of course not!” I accuse, “You pretend you’re doing this for me but really you’re helping yourself. You don’t care what I want.”

“I do, but what you want and what you need aren’t always the same.” Sinclair says, repeating the same Alpha nonsense he’s been preaching from day one.

Before I can stop myself, I’m surging forward, fueled by a strange and reckless courage. “I am so sick of your condescending bullshit,” I cry, smacking his hands away, “You’re a wolf so you get to boss me around, you’re a man so you know what I need better than I do – well I don’t accept that!”

My feeble swats, pushing back against his attempts to console me, grow more and more desperate, until I lash out with all my strength and strike Sinclair across the face. A loud clap rings through the air, and only too late do I realize what I’ve done.

Sinclair’s wolf blazes to life in his eyes, and I can only whimper, turn tail – and run.

Chapter 71 – Ella Gets a Lesson in Catharsis

Ella

Every instinct I possess is telling me to get away from Sinclair as fast as I can, but he catches me around the waist before I can move two feet. I know I've made a terrible mistake, and I don't have any idea where the impulse to strike him came from. I've never raised a hand against anyone in my life, and certainly not a man as dangerous as Sinclair – a predator who could snap me up in one bite.

When I'm yanked to a stop in his arms, I panic. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it, I don't know what happened." I exclaim, squirming despite my injuries. He lugs me up against his chest, keeping my body flush against him.

Sinclair emits a dark chuckle, and I realize he hasn't lost his temper. Far from it, he's entirely in control, but he's also not going to let me get away with hitting him. "Tsk, sweet Ella, I know exactly what happened." He purrs, "but you're not sorry – not yet anyway." His lips graze my ear, his deep voice turning my insides to jelly, "But you will be."

"Dominic please—" I beg, squirming in his arms, desperately trying to free myself from his grasp.

"I warned you, little one. This was your last strike." He answers coolly, "Now stop wriggling before you hurt yourself."

At once I'm struck by the difference I feel being trapped in his arms. If one of those rogues had caught me, I would have been too afraid to anger them to risk rebelling. After all, I've experienced the dreadful paralysis that occurs when you're too terrified to fight back against an attacker more than once. Yet I feel no such fear with Sinclair. I know he means to punish me, and yet I feel completely safe.

The ball gown is stripped from my body, and Sinclair settles on the bed, laying my body face down over his lap. "What are you doing?" I whimper, trying to rear up.

One of Sinclair's massive palms settles at the base of my spine, holding me in place as his free hand traces the curve of my bare bottom. "What do you think I'm doing?" He inquires, sounding as though he's taking far too much pleasure in this.

"You can't be serious!" I protest, "This is barbaric! I'm not a child!"

"You're right." Sinclair croons, still grazing his fingers over my skin and making the bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs swell and plump with rushing blood. "you're not a child, which means you should know better than to throw tantrums and strike people."

“But I’m pregnant,” I remind him, hoping he’ll take mercy. “You could hurt the baby.”

“Trust me sweetheart, if spankings harmed unborn pups my kind would have died out a long time ago.” Sinclair drawls, massaging the tense muscles of my lower back.

“Breeding she-wolves need to feel their mate’s dominance more than anyone else.”

The word “spanking” echoes in my mind, almost as if it’s some foreign term from another language. I know exactly what it means, but it seems impossible that I could truly be in this predicament. I’ve known plenty of punishments in my time, but none like this. None from someone who actually cares about me, and none that excite me despite my better judgment.

“Well that’s fine for you and your twisted were-friends, but I’m not into that sort of thing!” I insist, trying to ignore the flames engulfing my body. I can feel myself growing wet already, and I’m horrified when Sinclair scents the air, a satisfied rumble sounding in his chest. Surely he can’t smell my arousal? Right?

“Is that the story you want to stick with, Ella?” Sinclair questions, amusement heavy in his velvety tones as his fingers dip dangerously close to my swollen sex. No, no, no. I think. It’s too embarrassing! I’m sure I’ve never been this turned on in my life

– but what does that say about me? What’s wrong with me that I like this?

I whine, trying to jerk out of his reach. “This isn’t fair, you’re not the boss of me!” Why am I still provoking him? Why am I not begging for mercy?

“We’ll just see about that.” Sinclair intones, still massaging my backside. Belatedly I realize he’s warming my skin, preparing me for his discipline. When the first swat finally lands, I rear up, crying out in protest. I’m sure Sinclair is only using a fraction of his strength, but it still hurts. Even so, I know my reaction is more outrage than actual pain.

I kick my legs and beat my fists against Sinclair’s thighs, but he easily restrains me. This is so confusing, how can I feel safer being confined by his strong arms than I did when I was lashing out wildly? He lands another swat, on the opposite cheek this time – spreading the heat over my raised buttocks equally. He starts slowly, continuing to warm my skin until I’m accustomed to the sting, and then increasing his efforts.

I fight like a hellcat, furious that he’s doing this and yet more turned on than I can ever remember being. Something is wrong with me. I decide. Only someone deeply disturbed would enjoy this. He’s actually spanking me, like I’m a naughty child instead of the mother of his baby. The worst part is his deliciously dirty words, telling me what a bad girl I’ve been, scolding me for my misbehavior and yet praising my arousal – telling me how natural it is, how delicious I smell.

He doesn't let up until I stop trying to escape his hold, until I submit to his discipline and let go of my own control. When his relentless swats finally slow, I catch myself undulating, raising my bottom to meet his hand. With considerable effort, I force myself to still. "Is it over?" I ask miserably, trying to sound as pitiful as possible.

"On any other occasion it would be," Sinclair shares, sounding resigned now. "But you need to cry, Ella. You need to deal with the attack."

"But I don't want to." I moan, feeling very immature now.

"It's okay, I'm going to help you." Sinclair promises, stroking my spine. "And afterwards I promise I'll make you feel good."

"No, please... I don't want to cry." I confess, my voice very small now.

"Why not?" Sinclair asks. "What's so terrible about crying?"

Sniffing, I pluck up the courage to tell him my fears. After all – the man just spanked me, if I can be honest with anyone, it's him.

"I'm afraid if I start I won't be able to stop. I don't want to hurt."

Sinclair clucks sympathetically, clearly understanding that I'm not talking about physical pain. "I'll be with you the whole time." He promises. "I'm not going to let you face it alone."

I try to resist my instincts to submit as long as I can, holding myself tense as the swats rain down on my upturned bottom, growing sharper and more delectable with every volley. I might have been able to resist if it weren't for Sinclair's encouragement.

Now instead of telling me how naughty I've been he keeps insisting it's alright, that I'm safe and he'll take care of me.

It doesn't take much then, a few good swats and I collapse into Sinclair's arms, sobbing out my anguish into his legs until he pulls me up into his lap. I wince and hiss when my sore backside meets with his thighs, but he kisses and croons and rocks me as I work through the pain, and soon I forget about the indignity and outrage of my spanking.

"I'm sorry I was such a brat." I confess, nuzzling my face against his chest and breathing in his scent.

"I love your every mood." Sinclair assures me, "you never need to apologize for being yourself."

I shake my head. “When you say things like that I think you’re too good to be true.” I admit. “I don’t trust it.”

“That’s okay.” Sinclair affirms. “I’m not going to be scared off because you’re a bit skittish, Ella. You’re giving me an heir – I’m in this for the long haul.”

My heart sinks at the reminder he’s only doing this because I’m carrying his son, but I feel so cozy in Sinclair’s arms that I can’t bring myself to protest. He continues petting and cuddling me until my tears slow, though my rear end is still on fire. I’ve never known so many conflicting feelings.

I’ve been thoroughly punished, confronted my trauma and grief, and yet I’m also beside myself with lust. In fact, my desire is the only thing Sinclair has yet to satisfy, and I’m all too aware he vowed to take care of that as well.

As if he’s reading my mind, Sinclair slides his hand between my legs, feeling my sodden core and purring with approval. “Now, would you like me to make you feel good?”

Chapter 72 – Ella have a deal

Ella

Yes, yes, yes! The little voice in my head chants, so forcefully the words almost spill out of my mouth. I stop them just in time, even though I can't stop my hips from jerking up towards Sinclair's hand. Still, I manage to clasp my fingers around his wrist before he can make contact with my aching clit, even as my blood sings for release.

I desperately want to let Sinclair's give me the pleasure he's offering, but I feel so overwhelmed by all this. Too many things have happened in the last 24 hours, and I'm beyond confused by my reaction to Sinclair's discipline. All my emotions have been thrust together, smashed up and blended into a violent, swirling maelstrom– too muddled to differentiate. It's as though I've been completely unmoored, no long understanding my own heart or mind.

I look up at Sinclair, my eyes wide and still stinging with leftover tears. He's wearing that ravenous expression that makes me feel like he's about to gobble me up, but there's a softness in his eyes – an understanding that my body's base instincts are not on the same page with my distraught mind.

"I don't think I'm ready for that." I confess, my voice very soft. How surreal is it, that twenty four hours ago I was ready to give myself to him completely? To let him make love to me right there in the middle of the forest, despite all our efforts to keep our relationship platonic?

Maybe the Prince did us a favor with his attack, I think bitterly. He kept us from taking a step we wouldn't be able to take back –

from making a terrible mistake.

How can you say that? My conscience demands. Look at what Sinclair just did for you.

What? Spank me like a child? Make me cry like a baby? I bite back.

You know you feel better now, The infuriating voice replies, It hurts, but hurting is better than feeling nothing.

I'm not so sure about that. The feelings that flowed out of me after the spanking provided an entirely different kind of release than the one I need now, pouring out pent up emotions with no other outlet than tears. However I'm acutely aware that those feelings were only a drop in the bucket, the surface waters of a bottomless well of anguish I am not prepared to face.

Ignoring my conscience, I peek up at the huge Alpha. "Is that okay?"

“Ella, of course it’s okay.” Sinclair answers, studying me closely. “Do you want me to leave you, so you can take care of it yourself?” He offers, though there’s a low, growly quality to his voice that makes me think his wolf doesn’t like this idea one bit.

“No.” I object immediately, grasping for his shirt before I can think better of it. I don’t want him to leave, to lose his soothing touch– but I also have a sneaking suspicion that staying in his lap is a bad idea. I can feel his hardness digging into my sore backside, and I’m both squirming to relieve the sting of my punished flesh and the ache between my legs.

“Easy sweetheart.” Sinclair chuckles, “I’m not going anywhere.” He kisses my hair. Then, seeming to sense the problem, he sets me beside him on the bed. I wince, preferring the feel of his warm thighs over the cool silk of the duvet, but before I can feel too sorry for myself Sinclair slides his palm to my bare belly, feeling for the pup.

“How is he?” I ask, feeling both guilty for not asking sooner, but also afraid of hearing the answer. How much of my ordeal was the pup able to feel? Surely if he can sense my feelings he can feel my fear and pain. Is he also aware that his father just put me over his knee? Oh that is so wrong – no child should have to know those things about their parents.

“I wish you could see your face right now.” Sinclair teases, “But I promise he’s much too young to understand any of this. All he knows is that you were sad, and that you feel better now we’re together. He feels better too.”

“Was he very frightened last night?” I inquire, closing my eyes and leaning into his side.

“He was distressed, because he could feel your fear, but everything he knows is in response to you. And his own feelings haven’t become more complicated than sad or happy – they won’t until after he’s born.” He explains.

“But you could tell what he was making me crave.” I remind him, striving to understand.

Sinclair nods, “Hunger, pain, tiredness, those are all reflexive instincts, not emotions.” I sigh, taking this in and pressing my nose to his chest and breathing in his scent. “You see?” I can hear a smile in his voice. “You’re soothed my scent, so he’s happy.”

“But I thought I liked smelling you because it’s what he needs?” I murmur.

“That’s the way with mothers and pups – that’s why I say you have a connection every bit as magical as my own. Your wants and needs become one in the same.” Sinclair shares.

“Okay.” I breathe, knowing that the harder I think about this, the less sense it will make. The more time that passes, the more I’m learning that magic and logic do not always mix.

We pass the next few moments in silence, and though I’m still so needy I think I might scream, I also haven’t forgotten the reason we fought. My ball gown remains in a puddle on the floor, it’s gauzy, gemstone studded skirts glinting up at me in the low lighting. “Dominic?”

“Yes?” He prompts, running his fingers up and down my arm in the most distracting way. His touch is featherlight, and I know it’s intended to comfort me rather than excite, but I’m beginning to think that it’s impossible to be in physical contact with this man without being turned on. Hell, I was even turned on when he was spanking me – and it hurt like hell. On some level I understand it was his dominance I liked, rather than the pain, but it still seems so wrong.

“I think I need you to stop touching me.” I whisper, hating myself even as I say it.

“Okay.” He agrees, reluctantly shifting my small body away from his. I instantly feel cold and incomplete, and my feelings must show on my face because Sinclair laughs and taps his finger on my nose. “You asked for it, beautiful.”

“I know.” I complain, pulling the duvet up around me so that I won’t feel so exposed. Sinclair watches my movement with narrowed eyes, and I can see he’s holding back some bossy statement. Probably something about not hiding myself from him, though he seems to understand I won’t calm down as long as his gaze is raking over my naked skin. “I want to talk about the ball.”

“Ella–”

“No!” I insist, cutting him off, “Please just hear me out?”

Sinclair exhales heavily, “Go ahead.”

“Look, you were obviously right that I wasn’t okay,” I begin, feeling resigned. “But I wasn’t wrong either. We can’t let the Prince win.”

“We’re not.” Sinclair promises. “But you need your rest. You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’ve been through worse.” I announce, surprising us both. I didn’t intend on sharing that with Sinclair, but I need him to know I’m not going to fall to pieces at the first sign of danger. He doesn’t look surprised, he merely grimaces, as if he hates hearing this but also wants to ask for more details. Sensing this, I forge ahead before he can act on his impulse. “You made such a big deal about the Solstice, about how much these events

mean. If we skip it, the Prince will have an advantage.”

“The Prince doesn’t have a breeding mate.” Sinclair counters, “pregnant she-wolves get a lot more free passes in our society than those who are not.”

“But he’ll know.” I state stubbornly. “He’ll feel emboldened, like his plan is working. We have to show him it isn’t.”

Sinclair studies me for a long moment. “Is this truly what you want, or are you trying to prove something to me – because I promise you don’t have to.”

“Not everything is about you, you know.” I answer saucily, feeling a bit more of myself now.

Warmth floods my body at the sound of his laughter. “Careful little one, or I might think you didn’t learn your lesson the first time.”

“Please Dominic?” I request. “I want to go to the ball.”

“Hmm.” He hums thoughtfully. “If I agree, will you do something for me in return?”

“That depends,” I answer warily. “What do you want?”

“Will you promise to tell me about those worse things you’ve been through some day?” Sinclair inquires, grazing his knuckles over my cheek.

I go very still now. “I’ve never talked about those things with anyone. I’m not sure I know how.”

“I could help you.” Sinclair offers, “Like I helped you today.”

“If you think I’m going to let you spank me again –” I begin indignantly.

“Oh so you let me, did you?” He rumbles, sliding his hand around to my nape and making my toes curl. He grins wolfishly, shaking his head. “I hate to break it to you, baby – but that was far from your last spanking, whether it’s to help you tap into your feelings or not.”

“You’re a tyrant, you know that?” I remark, shooting him a sullen glare.

“Is that a no?” He asks, arching a brow.

“But why bother digging into all of that?” I question. “It’s in the past. Surely it’s better to leave it there.”

"I think we both know these things never stay in the past, Ella." Sinclair answers gravely. "I could see them weighing on you before you ever said a word."

"You could?" I squeak, hating to think I'm so transparent.

"Yes." He affirms gently, "And I don't want you carrying all that alone."

"But it's my burden to carry, not yours." I reason, not looking him in the eye.

Sinclair catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger, pulling my eyes up to his. "And I suppose you asked to carry it? You sought out the pain and heartache?"

I can see his point, though I don't want to. I can also see the advantage in keeping this deal some vague promise of the future.

The ball is tonight, so I can agree to share and then put off following through indefinitely. It's not a lie – not really. I know I'm not ever going to be ready to talk about those horrible things with Sinclair, so I just have to tell him as much when the time comes.

"Okay." I finally confirm. "You have a deal."

Chapter 73 – The Masquerade

Sinclair

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask, studying Ella.

Her golden eyes sparkle up at me. “Yes Dominic, for the thousandth time.” She sasses, “I’m sure.”

I chuckle, dropping a kiss to her hair. “Imp.”

We’re in the back of a limousine as it rolls slowly down the street, lined on all sides by clambering pack members eager to catch a glimpse of the shifter elite on their way to the King’s palace. Ella is tucked safely against my side, wearing an off the shoulder gown of deepest green.

Layer upon layer of sheer fabric winds around her body in graceful tendrils, leaving small flashes of her fair skin bared and outlining her feminine figure in the most tantalizing design, before cascading to the ground in a waterfall of chiffon. Amber gemstones glitter in her skirts, perfectly matching the delicate jewels of her necklace and earrings. Her hair has been piled up on top of her head, save for a few wisps left free, and her small feet are confined in a pair of sky high heels. Her mask is resting in her lap, waiting for the moment we’ll exit the car and don the intricate disguises required for the ball. Every time I look at her my lungs stop pumping, and I have to remind myself to breathe, struggling to remember how it’s done.

“I know you don’t like being told how beautiful you are, but sometimes it’s hard for me to keep it to myself.” I sigh, leaning down to nuzzle her neck and bask in her sweet scent.

Ella tilts her head to the side, giving me more room to work as I brush my nose and lips over her skin. “It’s not that I mind compliments,” Her breath hitches when I pause to nibble the place where her neck meets her shoulder. “I just don’t like being made to feel like that’s all I am.”

“Well you don’t have to worry there, because as lovely as you are, your beauty is my least favorite thing about you.” I remark, completely serious.

“Sure it is.” She giggles, the sound filling my body with pure sunshine.

“I mean it.” I reply honestly, “Of course, it’s not like that means much because I like all of you. Talking about my least favorite part is like talking about my least favorite dessert – at the end of the day it’s still dessert.”

She doesn’t answer, and when I finally stop exploring the silky curve of her throat, I find a guarded expression on her face, as if she’s waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Would you like to know my favorite thing about you?” I prompt, offering what she’s either too afraid or too shy to ask.

“I don’t know.” She shrugs, not looking me in the eye.

“Hmm,” I purr, enjoying the way her tightly wound little body immediately melts against mine. “It’s that warrior heart of yours.”

Ella snorts, finally raising her luminous gaze to mine. “No one has ever mistaken me for a warrior before.” She admonishes. “I think you’re just trying to flatter me now.”

“It’s no mistake.” I rumble sternly, not liking her self-deprecating tone. “I know warriors, and I know you. You have a heart that cannot be quelled – you love fiercely, and you don’t give up.”

Ella blushes, her cheeks growing so pink that I want to whisper all my secret desires in her ear, just to see how deeply I can make her flush. She peeks up at me from beneath her lashes. “Do you want to know my favorite thing about you?”

“Tell me,” I invite, not caring one bit whether her answer is about my looks or personality– as long as she has a favorite thing, she could tell me she likes my big toe and I’d still be grateful.

“You listen.” Ella shares softly. “Not because you think you should or that it’s the right thing to do – but because you want to. You want to understand, and you want your people to be happy.”

I can’t stop myself from kissing her, even if it’s only a brief graze of our lips. “I want you to be happy too, Ella.” I tell her, “I know that might feel impossible right now, with everything you’ve been through, but I’m going to make our family safe. And once I do I’m going to spoil you and the baby rotten.”

Her eyes widen slightly when I say, “our family,” and I realize I’ve never talked about us that way. However the more time that passes, the more obvious it becomes to me that Ella and I will be family. Whether we become romantically involved or not, we’re going to share a pup and that will tie us together for life. However, no sooner have I worked through these thoughts myself, than I see Ella’s expression transforming, taking on a decidedly devious glint.

“Does that mean you won’t boss me around anymore?” The minx replies, alight with mischief and desire in equal measure.

“You’ll let me walk all over you and get away with everything?”

I throw my head back, barking with laughter even as I fight the urge to tell the driver to turn the car around so I can take Ella home and finish what we started earlier. “Not even close, trouble.”

As the car pulls to a stop and we put on our masks, I glance at the media clamoring outside and feel Ella do the same. She recoils in surprise, and a rush of protectiveness slams into me. My wolf immediately rises to the surface, and I have to fight the urge to shift.

Let me out. My wolf demands. I’ll kill them before they lay a hand on her.

Calm down! I insist, shaking with the effort of holding him back.

But they’re scaring her! He insists. This was a mistake! It’s too soon.

After last night I don’t want to let anyone come near Ella, and her fear is forcing my possessive fury into overdrive. It’s as though I see threats everywhere I look, and I’d like nothing more than to attack every reporter in sight. Deep down, I also know that I wouldn’t be so on edge if we’d found an outlet for our sexual tension earlier. It goes against my every instinct not to reward my mate after she submitted so beautifully, and I feel as though my job is unfinished. Moreover, I wasn’t able to take the edge off of my own desire – and the need to claim her is suddenly so powerful I want to take her right here and now.

Mine, mine, mine. My wolf chants. I have to mark her.

No! I refuse ferociously. She’s not a wolf, it would hurt her.

Just a nibble? He begs, She smells so delicious.

Somehow I manage to get Ella out of the car and through the crowd, but no sooner have we stepped into the ballroom that Ella turns toward me with an exasperated look on her face. “Dominic, you’re acting like a dog guarding a bone.”

I arch my brows, letting some of my Alpha authority seep into my voice. “Am I now?”

Ella shivers, but doesn’t back down. “You just growled that attendant – the poor man practically wet himself.”

“He came too close to you!” I growl defensively

“He was taking my coat.” Ella reminds me, sounding almost stern. “You’ve got to find a way to calm down.”

"I don't think I can." I grumble, "The man who hired those rogues to kill you is here somewhere, no doubt plotting another attack."

Ella frowns. "Is there nothing I can do to help? You told me mates are supposed to calm each other."

I sigh and hold her tight so that she can't see my grimace. "Sweetheart, the things you could do to help are not things we could do in public, nor are you ready for them."

"Oh..." Ella's eyes go adorably wide as realization strikes. I watch her work through the implications of my words, and without a single word of help, she comes to the correct conclusion. "Would it still be this way, if I'd... if we'd... you know – after?" She trails off, blushing.

"After your spanking?" I supply.

Ella's blush turns crimson, and she leans forward impatiently. "Shhh!" Looking around to make sure no one overheard me, she agrees, "Yes."

"It would have helped me take the edge off, but–"

Before I can finish the sentence, Ella gives me a fierce glare and a delectable pout. "You should have told me, I can still–"

She's about to offer something I might not be able to turn down, so I stop her, softening the force of my growl at the last moment.

"No, this was always going to be the case, Ella. I don't like you being here with all these wolves after what happened last night. If I had my way I would have kept you at home in bed until this campaign is over."

"Then maybe..." she pulls my hand to her tummy, and the tiny bump hidden by her skirts. "Maybe just feel the baby. Feel how secure we are in your arms, how safe I feel with you. Nothing's going to happen, and I promise to stay close."

Warmth washes over me, and I smile down at the precious bundle in my arms, amazed that she seems to know exactly what to say to help me, despite not understanding so much about our kind. However, no sooner have I started to relax, than the Prince enters. He scans the room until his eyes land on Ella and I, then crosses the floor – heading straight towards us.

Chapter 74 – Dancing with the Prince

Ella

As soon as the Prince catches sight of Sinclair and I, his eyes flash with obvious rage. I can tell he's surprised to see us here, though he must have known I survived the hunt. When none of his rogues returned to confirm my death, he would have immediately realized what happened. Still, I'm sure he expected Sinclair to do exactly what he just suggested, and keep me home at all costs.

Despite his fury, the Prince quickly covers his emotions and stalks toward us. I can feel Sinclair vibrating with dangerous energy, and I lean into him, letting him feel my warmth and breathe in my scent. He's making low grumbly sounds, though not the kind he often makes when he's kissing or scent marking me, which let me know his wolf is pleased. These are very different: sharp and vicious, hinting at barely contained aggression.

"It's okay." I whisper. "He can't do anything here."

"I'll kill him." Sinclair snarls under his breath. "You need to leave, before this gets ugly."

I can tell Sinclair is no longer in control and I know his wolf is urging him to protect the baby even if it costs him the campaign. Of course, killing the Prince would get rid of the competition, but I don't think it would comprise very good optics for a future King. I don't understand enough about shifter society to know for sure, but my instincts are telling me that a death match on one of the most sacred days of the year is a bad idea.

"I'm not going anywhere." I answer firmly, digging in my heels.

"Ella, I wasn't asking." Sinclair snaps, pinning me with his most intimidating gaze.

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I feel the sudden urge to cower before the predator towering over me, but I can't bring a pup into the world without Sinclair, and I'm not going to risk him being thrown in jail or exiled. "You can threaten me and punish me however you like." I remark coolly, pretending that my knees haven't completely turned to jelly. "But I promised not to leave your side, and I meant it."

Sinclair's powerful arm squeezes my waist, pulling me even closer against him even though our bodies were already flush. He drops his lips to my ear. "This is not the time to test me, little human."

Before I can respond, the Prince appears in front of us. Acting on instinct, I start to pull away from Sinclair, forcing him to pull me back and keep his hands occupied holding me in place, rather than ripping the Prince to shreds. "Happy Solstice, Dominic," The Prince greets, before turning his wolfish gaze to me. "Ella. You're looking very well."

Another growl rends the air between us, but I move directly in front of Sinclair, making a human barrier between the wolves with my body. I lean my back into Sinclair's chest, encouraging him to wrap his arms around me and rest his palms over the baby.

"Thank you." I smile, trying to sound genuine. "We're so pleased to be here – though I'm afraid our masks didn't do much to disguise us." I laugh falsely.

Sinclair is muttering a steady litany of threats in my my head, using his connection with the baby to make his voice echo in my mind. He compliments me even as he promises to punish me for my interference, and I reach back to run my fingers through his silky hair, soothing him even though I'm making myself the target of his outrage. You're in so much trouble, you magnificent, fearless little angel. What are you thinking?

"Ah well, it's hard to go incognito when you're as famous as you two." The Prince grins, creating a conniving, cruel expression. "It seems like I can't open the newspaper these days without seeing you two staring back at me."

I shrug gently, an audience is forming around us, drawn in by the magnetic pull of watching two competing alphas. "It's amazing isn't it? You'd think people would have gotten bored of us by now."

You're too clever for your own good. Dominic is saying, making it very difficult for me to focus on the Prince's response. I need to make him pay for what he did. I need to kill him.

"Well there's no accounting for taste – especially among commoners." The Prince is snidely remarking.

"Forgive me," I answer boldly, speaking loudly enough for our onlookers to hear. "But weren't you a commoner until your father became King? It seems awfully callous to write off so many people just because they haven't been as lucky as you. After all, that's why you're in this position – isn't it? Luck?" A stark murmur works through the crowd around us. When we get home I'm going to put you right back over my knee and this time I'm not going to let you get away without coming at least three times, you brilliant, impossible creature. At this point I press one of my stiletto's onto Sinclair's foot, needing him to shut up before I become so aroused that the entire room can smell my desire. Of course, he only responds with a low chuckle.

That might work if you weighed more than a field mouse, little one. But that's okay – I won't forget that you tried to stomp on me again.

"What interesting ideas your mate has, Dominic." The Prince comments, looking over my head to speak to Sinclair with barely contained rage. He obviously hates being shown up in public, but he's in the same position as Sinclair, trapped by convention.

“I wonder if you might release her for a dance? I’d be very curious to speak with her further.”

“I don’t think so.” Sinclair growls, before I can respond. “Ella is struggling with morning sickness, too much spinning on the dance floor might trigger it.”

Sighing, I tilt my face up to his, urging him to lower his ear to my mouth. I’m wishing I could speak to him through the baby, the way he does with me, but I also know that the more intimate we appear for the media, the better the reports will seem. “It’s okay.”

I insist. “He won’t hurt me with you watching.”

No. He responds immediately. You’re mine, he can’t have you – even for a dance.

“Dominic, he underestimates me. He thinks I’m a dumb commoner, I might be able to get information from him he wouldn’t admit to you.” I reason. “And it would look good to the council. I doubt they want it to appear like there’s a risk of civil war between the Alphas.”

I hate this. Sinclair complains in my head. I need you to be safe. I need him to be dead.

“You need to win. The baby and I need you to win, and you can’t do that if we make a scene here.” I counter.

Goddess, damn it! The next thing I know, Sinclair has spun me to face him. His mouth claims mine with urgent need, drawing a whimper from my lips as I open for his questing tongue. I’m sure the Prince is still standing behind us, impotently waiting for us to reach a decision. We pay him no mind. Instead I let Sinclair ravish me for all to see, stealing kiss after kiss from my swollen mouth and nibbling my neck before he releases me. I’ll be right here. If you need me, just send me a look, and I’ll be there.

“I promise.” I confirm, “I’ll ask for help if I need it.”

You better! Sinclair claims once last kiss before letting me go, glaring at the Prince over my head. “Make it quick.”

I turn and accept the Prince’s outstretched hand, shaking off Sinclair when he doesn’t immediately release me. Gradually he does, though I can see him in my periphery, following our progress as we move onto the dance floor.

“Dominic is very protective of you.” The Prince observes, glancing at the wolf currently stalking us.

“Aren’t you protective of your mate?” I reply. “I thought all Alphas were that way – all true

Alphas that is.”

The Prince’s wolf glows in his eyes, and I know I’ve struck a chord. I’m not sure where I found the courage to question his dominance. Maybe it’s the baby, or maybe Sinclair is rubbing off on me – either way it’s difficult to be afraid of the Prince when I spend all my time with a man who is ten times more powerful.

“Hmph.” The Prince murmurs, barely containing his ire. “I suppose.”

We move through the dance for a few moments, and I try not to pay attention to Sinclair. I try to focus on the steps and not make a fool of myself, but I’m painfully conscious of the emerald eyes glued to my back.

“You know – I had my investigators look into you.” The Prince declares abruptly, as if he’s talking about running an errand rather than invading my privacy

“Did you?” I counter, making an effort to sound nonchalant. However the little voice in my head is struggling not to panic. If his investigators searched for me in the Bloodbane pack, they won’t have found anything. And if they searched for me here, they might have discovered my true identity. “And tell me, what did you find?”

“Well, it’s the strangest thing.” The Prince replies, suddenly looking like a hunter going in for the kill. “They didn’t find anything.

Not a single thing.”

Chapter 75 – The Prince Slips Up

Ella

As the Prince and I move around the dance floor, I'm only too conscious that every eye in the room is on us. Of course, none of those eyes weigh on my shoulders so heavily as Sinclairs. I'm working hard not to accidentally send him any signals that I need to be rescued, but it isn't easy – especially after the Prince just confronted me with one of the many lies I've been telling.

"That's not surprising." I bluff. "I lived a quiet life before coming here."

"There's quiet and then there's nonexistent." The Prince mutters bleakly. "And forgive me but I find it highly suspicious that you made absolutely no impact on your prior pack. After all – one would expect a she-wolf qualified to be Luna to have a high profile."

"Believe it or not," I begin, deciding to tell at least one truth tonight, "but I didn't find my strength until I met Dominic. He's helping me recognize that my power was always there, but sometimes it takes seeing yourself through someone else's eyes to appreciate the parts of ourselves we take for granted. So, no I didn't have a high profile in the Bloodbane pack."

The Prince scoffs. "I wouldn't be so quick to admit that, Ella. Just imagine what the council would think if they knew." His tone implies advice, but his eyes glint with an obvious threat.

"I'll gladly tell them myself." I counter coolly, "I'm not ashamed of my past, and I think people need leaders who can be honest about their journeys. No one starts out in this world as a force of nature; they become one after being molded and weathered by the elements. Dominic and I are examples of how even the strongest of our kind become so through resilience and strife, as well as the people with whom you surround yourself – not blind ambition."

The Prince has been keeping his voice low, no doubt afraid of being overheard, but when I continue to speak at a volume guaranteeing others will hear our conversation, he loses his temper. "Would you keep your voice down?!"

"Why, don't you want people to know our positions?" I counter, feeling an unfamiliar spike of adrenaline. Is this how hunters feel when they know they're closing in? When they've got their target cornered. "Don't you want them to be fully informed before the election?"

"That isn't how things are done!" The Prince snaps, forgetting to whisper now.

"Well maybe it should be." I answer coldly. "Why adhere to outdated traditions just

because that's the way things have always been done? Being done doesn't mean they're right or effective."

The Prince growls, and I see the wolves around us rear back in shock. I know I have scant seconds before Sinclair will appear and snatch me away from the Prince so he can attack, so I offer the tyrant in front of me my widest smile, hoping it will convince Sinclair I can handle this.

"See, this is exactly what I mean," I beam, mildly surprised at how little fear I truly fear. "Growling at breeding she-wolves half your size really seems like a practice that should have been left in the dark ages, don't you think?"

The Prince glowers, abruptly stopping and yanking me close enough so he can hiss in my ear, "You dumb bitch, I don't know how you survived last night, but mark my words, I'm going to get rid of you and that brat you're growing one way or another. You should leave while you still can, if you stay I guarantee your days are numbered!"

His claws are digging into my bandaged arms, and I know I can't give into my instincts to growl back at him. I don't care if he's threatening me, but the idea that he's threatening my pup makes me want to rant and rage – to destroy him no matter the cost.

Any fear I might have once felt for myself has translated into primal protectiveness for my child. The problem is that it might cost us the campaign – I know how important it is for me to continue looking calm and unintimidated by the Prince. If I let the people around us see my fear or anger I'll lose the upper hand.

Luckily Sinclair appears in our path before I can lose control and snap back the way I want to. He suddenly steps into our path, all rugged good looks and raw power. My belly swoops and flutters when I see him, and the next thing I know, he's extracting me from the Prince's arms. "I'm going to take my mate back now." He announces with a lethal grin, not waiting for the Prince to agree. "It's been too long."

I laugh, "It's only been a few minutes."

"I meant what I said." Sinclair beams, sending a ripple of laughs around the room as he sweeps me into his arms. We spin away on the dance floor, leaving the Prince to stew in his anger.

Only once we've left our audience behind and I'm swaying safely in Sinclair's arms, does he drop his lips to my ear. "What did he say to you?"

I glance up at him hesitantly. "I'm not sure I should tell you, not here at least."

"If you don't tell me now I'm going to throw a tantrum right here in the middle of the

dance floor.” Sinclair jokes, though there’s a sharp edge in his voice that tells me he’s not merely jesting. He might have chosen the words to make me laugh, but I can tell he needs to know the truth if he’s going to maintain his control.

“He admitted sending the rogues after me.” I relate, peeking up at him. “He threatened me and the baby, told me to leave while I still can.”

Sinclair pulls me closer, until I can no longer see his handsome face. Still, I can picture him glowering at everyone around us, staring daggers at anyone who sets eyes on me – like a dragon guarding its treasure. “Don’t worry, Ella.” Sinclair rumbles, his strong hands caressing my spine. “I won’t let him hurt you or the baby.”

“I know you won’t.” I assure him, leaning close so he can feel my solid weight in his arms. “I trust you, Dominic.”

I’m amazed to realize I’m speaking the truth. I do trust Sinclair, despite everything I’ve been through. I know he wouldn’t intentionally hurt me, and I know he’ll keep me safe.

“Thank you, baby.” He croons, sending delicious shivers down my spine. Even as I revel in his warm tone and terms of endearment, his earlier threats are still ringing in my ears, and I have to wonder whether I have another punishment ahead of me.

“Am I still in trouble?” I squeak, not sure whether I’m hoping he says yes or no. There’s something strangely addictive about his dominance, and I’m still aching for his touch. At the time I thought the longing would pass with time, but it seems like my hormones have gotten the better of me. Rather than passing, my desire has only grown, and the flames were stoked ever higher when he began scolding me earlier.

“No, sweetheart.” He answers, donning an indulgent smile. “You kept me from making a terrible mistake. You helped me stay calm when I was completely out of control. You don’t deserve a punishment, if anything you deserve to be rewarded.”

“Oh? What kind of reward?” I inquire, both hoping he’ll give me a scandalous answer, and praying he won’t. I’m not sure how much longer I can resist him, even though I know I should.

He chuckles, sending heat through every inch of my body. “That’s a dangerous question, little one.”

I smother a whimper, even as heat pools in my core. I hear Sinclair take in a sharp breath, and I’m sure he can smell my arousal again. I lean my forehead against the hard muscles of his chest. “What are we doing, Dominic?” I sigh, knowing I’m being terribly contrary. “I’m sorry, I know I’m not making any of this easier – I’m just so confused.”

“It’s okay to be confused.” He promises. “And I think you were right this afternoon. You’ve been through too much. You’re not in any state of mind to make those kinds of decisions today – no matter what your body wants.”

“But my body wants it so badly.” I confess, figuring that I’ve already admitted as much in our dream date, so I have nothing left to lose.

“Mine does too.” Sinclair smiled wryly, “if you could hear my wolf, Ella – you’d be scandalized... maybe even frightened.”

“I’m not sure I could be frightened of you. Not the way you mean at least.” I breathe, “it’s the strangest thing, if you were anyone else I’d be terrified, but it’s like the baby won’t let me.”

“He’s a smart baby.” Sinclair confirms, putting up with pride. “He gets that from you.”

I’m tempted to argue, but I can see a warning glint in Sinclair’s eyes and think better of it. “So what do we do? How do we resist this?”

“We keep at it.” Sinclair decides, “until we can’t any longer.”

“And then?” I prompt him, curious beyond words. “When we can no longer resist?”

“We give in.” Sinclair answers, lowering his forehead to mine. “And pray we can survive it.”

Chapter 76 – Hormones

Ella

It's been three weeks since the ball, and though I can scarcely believe it, it seems like all the campaign drama passed with Solstice. There has been nothing but calm since the holidays, and I'm beyond thrilled that I've been able to relax a bit, even though part of me is waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under us.

I've spent my time pouring over baby books, making plans for our nursery, and brainstorming baby names – and the best part is that I've felt less nauseated and achy every day. In fact, yesterday marked the beginning of my second trimester – since shifter pregnancies are so short – and it seems impossible to think my baby will arrive in four short months. My stress has already eased knowing I'm leaving the most vulnerable phase of my pregnancy behind, and I don't even mind that I've been seeing Sinclair less now that he's gone back to a regular work schedule.

Well, that's not entirely true. I miss him. I miss him much more than I should, but I'm also grateful for the space. It's much easier to resist our attraction to each other when we're not constantly together and taking part in intimate rituals and romantic outings.

I don't know why you're being so stubborn. The little voice in my head mutters. If you're going to give in eventually, why not throw in the towel now and enjoy being together in the last months before the baby comes? You do realize that in another four months you'll never be alone again.

I'm not having this argument again. I decide. We agreed it's better for the baby if we can co-parent without our own relationship drama getting in the way.

You mean you decided and he went along with it because he doesn't know it's such a stupid reason. My conscience snipes.

It's not stupid! I insist. I'm going to be a mother, I have to put my baby first – that's what being a parent is all about.

You keep telling yourself that. The voice derides. We both know you're just a big scaredy cat.

Oh put a sock in it! I exclaim, losing my patience. "Stupid conscience." I mutter aloud, sorting through the clothing racks in my giant closet and trying to choose an outfit for our parenting class tonight. "Uppity, annoying, impossible..."

"Talking to yourself, trouble?" Sinclair's deep voice breaks through my angry diatribe, and I jump about ten feet in the air.

Whirling around, I find him leaning in the closet doorway, watching me intently. "Dominic, you scared me half to death!"

The big wolf tsks, coming forward and pulling me into his arms, petting me gently. "I'm sorry." He croons, kissing my hair.

"Sometimes I forget how weak your hearing is."

"My hearing is fine!" I object, feeling irrationally angry all of a sudden. "It's your ridiculous shifter stealth that's the problem. It's not right that anyone as big as you should be able to move around so quietly."

"Alright." He agrees, and I have a sneaking suspicion he's smothering a smile. "It's my fault, I'm a big hulking beast and I need to do a better job of stomping around."

I pull away from him, narrowing my eyes. "Are you laughing at me?"

Now Sinclair does smile, "Is there any way I can answer that question that won't annoy you?"

I huff, deciding not to dignify that question with an answer. I turn back to my closet, beginning to rifle through trouser options.

"Nothing fits anymore." I complain, eliminating every pair of pants I come across. "I can't button any of these!"

Sinclair's palm rubs over the gentle curve of my belly. The changes are still very slight, but my clothing has gone from being a bit tight to entirely too small. My breasts might not be so tender anymore, but they spill out of all my bras, and my favorite fitted tops now stretch and strain to cover my growing tummy. "That's a good thing, Ella." Sinclair reminds me gently. "It means the baby is growing big and strong."

"Oh enough of that!" I argue, not sure why I'm so determined to disagree with everything he says. "All that means is that your giant pup is coming closer to pushing my body past its limits. Normal women don't show this much at this stage you know." My throat is stinging with the threat of tears, even though I know I'm being unreasonable. I feel like I'm on a roller coaster, I can see exactly what's happening, but I also can't get off the ride.

Sinclair clucks sympathetically, "You're having a rough day, aren't you, sweetheart?" I can hear the guilt in his voice, and it makes me want to cry all the more. He's been working from home a lot and I can tell he feels like he's neglecting us, but there's also nothing to be done. He bears so much responsibility, and it's only going to get worse if he wins the crown. Suddenly I feel terrible for being so grumpy with him, when he's

already blaming himself despite doing everything he can to take care of me.

“I’m sorry.” I sniffle. “I shouldn’t be giving you a hard time.”

“You’re allowed.” He promises, pulling a wrap dress from the clothing rack. “Here, no buttons, no zippers. You don’t even have to wear a bra.”

“Thank you.” I murmur, sliding my arms around his middle and squeezing tightly. Sinclair purrs and snuggles me until I’ve had my fill, and half an hour later we’re back on the padded floors of our monthly birthing class, listening to the instructor explain precisely why I’m slowly losing my mind.

“Moms, you’ll be feeling physically better now that you’re out of the first trimester, but this is the time when your hormones really kick into high gear. You may already be experiencing some intense mood swings, as well as physical changes to things like hair growth or skin pigmentation.” She looks around at the couples spread out on the mats, and I see I’m not the only expectant mother looking sheepish or anxious.

“You’ll also experience heightened libidos – something I encourage you all to take advantage of, as you won’t have time for much fun after your pup arrives.”

Oh great. I think bitterly. As if it wasn’t already hard enough to resist Sinclair. I’d known this was part of pregnancy, but I also hadn’t understood how powerless I’d be to my hormones. I’d assumed it would be like PMS mood swings, not these constant extremes. The instructor is still speaking. “Bottom line, mates, it’s your job to keep Mom satisfied and relaxed during these next few months. She’s going to need you to be her rock while she weathers these stormy seas, so I encourage you not to go overboard coddling her – tempting as it may be. Her wolf needs to feel your strength now more than ever.”

Somehow I really don’t think they give the same advice in human birthing classes. I mutter to my conscience.

A warm chuckle rumbles against my back and Sinclair’s voice sounds in my mind. You should see the look on your face.

I look up at Sinclair, wondering how he was able to see my expression in the first place. He grins down at me, then steals a kiss from my pouting lips.

“You also need to create a birthing plan you’re both comfortable with.” The instructor carries on. “By show of hands, who here is considering a home birth rather than a hospital birth.”

I raise my hand hesitantly. I haven’t decided which option I feel most comfortable with yet, but I’m open to either and want to hear what she has to say. However, almost as

soon as I put my hand up, a low growl sounds in my ear. “Put that lovely little hand down. You’re going to deliver in the hospital and that is not up for discussion.”

I turn to glare at him. I might not be decided yet, but I don’t appreciate him taking away my options. “You’re supposed to be keeping me relaxed and listening to my instincts.” I state fiercely, mimicking the instructor in a saccharine tone even though the whole class can probably hear us, “trusting my body’s wisdom.”

“Ella, you’re high risk.” Sinclair reminds me sternly, the rugged contours of his face set in a foreboding expression. “We need to be at the hospital in case the doctors need to make an emergency intervention.”

I know he’s thinking of my high blood pressure, not to mention the fact that I’m going to be the first human in recorded history to give birth to a shifter. I also know this makes sense, but his high handed manner is making me gnash my teeth in frustration, “It’s my body.”

His wolf flashes in his eyes, “You’re mine – and so is this baby. I’m not going to let you endanger him or yourself, Ella.”

Without thinking, I offer him a snarl – which on my lips sounds more like the grumble of an angry kitten, but I’m sure my intentions are clear.

Sinclair’s hands tighten around me. His power washes over me, and I wish I had a tail to tuck between my legs. “Did you just growl at me, little mate?”

Despite my trembling spine, I tilt my chin up defiantly. “Why not? You growl at me all the time.”

Before he can respond, the instructor laughs, breaking the tense silence in the rest of the room and reclaiming control over the class. “You see, this is the perfect example of why it’s important to talk about these things together early on. You might assume you’re on the same page but discover you have different ideas.”

It’s also an example of why naughty humans need just as firm a hand as she wolves. Sinclair intones, speaking through his bond with the baby. His mouth is at my throat, his lips grazing the spot where he’ll one day pretend to mark me. I feel a nip from his fangs, and my anger abruptly slips away. All of a sudden my entire body melts, and I realize that the instructor had been right – I do need to feel Sinclair’s strength right now. Then again, maybe this is more hormonal insanity, because why else am I now wishing he could mark me for real?

Chapter 77 – Baby Names

Sinclair

“What do you think about this one?” I ask, pulling Ella’s attention away from the rack of onesies she’s currently perusing.

“Oh, so you care what I want now?” She retorts, shooting me a sulky glare. She’s been pouting ever since we left our parenting class, and despite the instructor’s quick thinking to prevent us having a very public argument, I know Ella hasn’t gotten over my high-handed order regarding a hospital birth. We decided to spend our free afternoon shopping for baby gear before we ever left the house today, or I’m sure she wouldn’t have agreed to stay in my company. The stubborn creature has done her best to ignore me since our disagreement, only allowing me to touch her when required for class and barely speaking to me.

Now, as I’m considering cribs and strollers, Ella has placed herself as far away as she can get without leaving my sight, a line she seemed to understand she shouldn’t cross no matter how unhappy she is with me. Sighing, I cross the small shop until I’m looming over her. “Ella, of course I care about what you want. I didn’t mean to dismiss your feelings earlier, but there are some risks I’m simply not willing to take.”

“I just wanted to consider my options.” Ella grumbles back, crossing her arms over her chest and unintentionally pushing her pert breasts together. “I don’t even know that I would want a home birth, I just thought it was something to consider.”

Dragging my gaze from her lush body, I answer. “I understand that and if our situation were different, I wouldn’t have a problem with a home birth, but our situation isn’t different.” I reach for her, but she backs out of my reach. “If you want a water birth or a doula, we can arrange for those things at the hospital, but we need to be practical.”

Ella glowers up at me, her lower lip quivering dangerously. I have a bad feeling she’s about to cry, and suddenly I’m wishing she would growl at me again. I can’t recall ever hearing such a cute noise except from actual pups. I wasn’t about to let her get away with it, but it had also been very difficult not to smile. “I don’t want the baby to be high risk.” Ella finally shares, her voice husky. “It isn’t fair.”

“I agree.” I tell her seriously, hating the idea of either one of them being threatened. “But it is the reality, and we have to make sure you have the safest birth possible. In fact, if your blood pressure doesn’t come down by the end of the week, I think we need to go back to the doctor.”

Ella nods, fighting back a hiccup. Her golden eyes are shining, and I’m quickly losing my patience with the distance between us.

“Okay.”

“Okay.” I repeat, ducking my head to try and catch her eye. “So are we friends again? Can we kiss and make up?”

Ella willingly comes into my arms, her small, warm body all tension and sharp edges. She snuggles into my embrace and breathes in my scent, though she doesn't give up her sulking completely. “You better not be this bossy in the delivery room.”

I chuckle, low and deep, stroking her long hair. “Oh, you're going to let me be in the delivery room?” I ask, surprised that she wants this, even though I always planned on forcing my way in.

To my surprise, Ella pulls back with a sharp intake of breath. “You are going to be there aren't you?”

She looks so frightened by the prospect of delivering the baby alone that my wolf begins to instinctively purr. “Of course, sweet Ella. I'm not going to let you do it alone – even if you hate me when the time comes and try to kick me out, I won't leave.”

Her racing heart slows, but she eyes me suspiciously. “That sounds bossy.”

“I said I would be there, not that I wouldn't be bossy.” I tease, pulling her close again.

“Tyrant.” She accuses, even as she nuzzles her face into my chest.

“Troublemaker.” I reply, relieved that we're no longer at odds even though I find her feisty nature irresistible. I much prefer keeping our disagreements playful, rather than serious. “We haven't talked about baby names either.” I realize aloud, “We should probably figure these things out before we go back to class. I don't think our teacher appreciated us stealing her thunder.”

“We can talk about names.” Ella agrees, seeming content to stay wrapped in my arms, even though other customers are already glancing our way – smiling to themselves. Oblivious, Ella performs a huge yawn, her lovely lips stretching wider than I thought was possible.

“Mhmm, do you want to keep shopping while we do?” I inquire, trying to keep the amusement out of my voice. “Or do you want to go home and take a nap?”

“We can keep shopping.” She answers, making no effort to move.

“You do know you'll have to let me go in order to do that, right?” I ask, wanting nothing of the kind.

Ella blinks, as if she didn't realize she was already half asleep and leaning all her weight against me. She steps back, smoothing down her dress as she considers the cribs in front of us. "Well, what are your thoughts about names?"

I flash her my most wolfish grin. "How about Thor or Rex?"

Ella gapes, not realizing I'm only making mischief. "You might as well call him butch or spike!" She exclaims, her voice taking a haughty turn. "He might be a wolf but that doesn't mean you have to give him a dog's name, Dominic."

"Well he'll be Alpha one day, so it should be something strong." I reply, still smiling at my indignant little human.

She snorts, "names don't make someone strong – that's about character and integrity."

"Oh really?" I challenge, "so you think calling our son daffodil will set him up for success, do you?"

I've never seen someone so much shorter than me try to look down their nose at me, but somehow Ella manages. "I think if we call our son daffodil, he'll redefine the word for generations to come."

"Maybe, but he'll also be bullied on the playground his entire childhood." I reason, pretending to read the information sheet for one of the strollers.

"Which is why we can't name him anything as ridiculous as Rex." Ella replies, digging in her heels. "I just don't think you should let something as arbitrary as a name decide someone's character."

"Well see that's where we disagree, you see, I believe there is great power in names." I explain, actually meaning my words now.

She frowns pensively, "how about Henry, for your father?"

Suddenly my interest in getting a rise out of Ella evaporates. "That's a very sweet idea." I concede, pinning her with my gaze.

"But do you like the name Henry?"

"It's not my favorite." She shrugs, "but I don't dislike it."

"And I suppose someone who loves children as much as you do – who's been trying for so long... there's no chance you have names already picked out, right?" I guess, already

knowing the answer to my question.

Ella flushes a delectable shade of pale pink, but she doesn't say a word.

"Well, come on – out with it." I encourage.

"Why don't you tell me yours first." She suggests, "your real ones I mean."

Laughing, I agree. "I've always liked the name Damon. Then there's Gabriel, or Maxim... but my favorite is Orion."

"Like the hunter, from all the myths?" Ella clarifies.

"Not to mention the stars." I reply, thinking of the constellation.

"I like that idea." She muses, smiling softly. "I always imagine that if I had a son, I'd call him Rafe."

"Rafe," I repeat, rolling the name over my tongue. "You know that means wolf, don't you?"

Ella stops in her tracks, and though I initially suspect that she's merely surprised the name she chose has this particular meaning, when I look over at her I freeze. Her eyes are full of tears, and her hand is pressed to her stomach.

"Sweetheart, what is it?" I ask urgently, closing the distance between us.

"The baby," She answers, her cheeks splitting into an incandescent smile. "He just moved. I think he might have kicked!"

"What!" I immediately move my hand alongside hers, knowing I'm grinning like a fool.

"It was when you said, Rafe." As the name leaves her lips, the tiniest bump flutters against my hand, and suddenly we're both laughing. My own eyes are shining now, and I pull Ella's mouth down to my own. "I think we just named our baby." I tell her ecstatically between kisses.

We stay like that for a long time, repeatedly saying the name and celebrating every time our son kicks in reply. Through the bond I can tell he loves the sound of our laughter and joy, and soon he's kicking just to make us smile. Eventually we give up on shopping entirely. I take Ella home and lavish her with all her favorite things – the self care gifts I'd been unable to give her after the Wild Hunt. We spend the rest of the day curled up in front of a blazing fire, and reveling in our delight over this milestone. I know our future is

still so uncertain, but right now everything is perfect, and I'm not going to take a single moment for granted.

Chapter 78 – Ella Eavesdrops

Sinclair

A week after our pup started moving, my brother appears on my doorstep, claiming to bring news of the Prince. I'm amazed to discover that I'm not angry to see him for the first time in years. In fact, as strange as it seems, I'm actually thankful for his presence. I'm still not sure whether he's truly my ally, but my wolf is urging me to trust him, and he's rarely wrong.

Besides, any intelligence – even false intelligence – is still new information, and I can sniff out a lie better than anyone. “How's Ella?” He asks, pulling off his coat.

“She's perfect.” I boast, unable to help myself. I can feel myself beaming, but I can't seem to turn off my smile muscles. “She's napping right now, and we're going back to the doctor tomorrow because her blood pressure is still a bit elevated... but otherwise she's absolutely wonderful. I couldn't have asked for a better mother for my pup.”

“I meant... after the attack.” Roger clarifies, looking slightly baffled by my effusiveness.

“Oh,” I pause, laughing softly. “Sorry, it's easy to get caught up. She's still a bit shaken, but her nightmares are happening less frequently now.”

“You're really in love, huh?” Roger inquires, looking surprised.

I scoff, “Did you really doubt that?” I don't pause to consider this idea. As far as Roger knows we fell in love and chose to start a family together. He shouldn't have any reason to think this is all a lie, and I don't like the idea that he might be onto our scheme.

“I mean, you haven't marked her, I figured you were only with her for political reasons.” He shrugs.

“The politics are just a bonus.” I rumble, and I'm mildly amazed to realize this isn't a lie. At some point the advantages of faking a relationship with Ella shifted, and after more than two months together, I'm discovering that I enjoy her company far more than I enjoy winning the campaign. Winning the campaign is important and necessary yes, but it's always been a duty, not a personal ambition that gives me pleasure.

“Anyway, what of the Prince?” I ask, ushering Roger into my office.

“Well if possible, he hates Ella even more than he hates you.” Roger sighs. “I think there's something about being shown up by a she-wolf infuriates him or emasculates him on some visceral level. He really has it out for her.”

“He's already tried to kill her twice.” I remark coldly, “I'm not sure how much worse things

could get.”

“Dom, he doesn’t just want her dead now.” Roger grimaces. “He wants to make her pay first, to punish her, drag it out and make her death as painful as possible. And he wants to make sure you truly suffer too.”

My wolf rises to the surface, and for a moment I have to step away just to breathe. I count to ten inside my head, resisting the urge to shift and trying to block out the furious howls roaring through my head. “Do you know what he’s planning? Why is he taking so long to act if he hates her so much.”

“Because he’s needed the time to figure out how to get her away from you. That’s part of why things have been quiet this last month – he’s been plotting.” Roger shares, seeming truly disturbed to be delivering this news.

Goddess Damn it! I think desperately. This is all my fault, I put her in this danger!

We have to kill him. My wolf snarls, Forget the politics. She and the pup won’t be safe as long as he lives.

We can’t just kill him. His father is the King. He’s bound to take revenge for his son’s murder and unlike the Prince, he has an entire army at his back. Besides, even if he doesn’t – I won’t be considered a suitable candidate anymore and the Alpha council might call off the election. Then the man who paralyzed Dad will be rewarded with a throne he stole!

But it’s Ella. My wolf insists. And it’s the pup. We have to protect them.

“Plotting what?” I growl, my clenched fists shaking with rage as my claws extend and retract.

“He’s going to try and lure her out on her own so he can take her. Right now your guards are keeping his spies at a distance, but he’s planning a campaign event for the Lunas. He thinks if he can guarantee a women-only event then you won’t be around to protect her.” Roger shares, watching me nervously, as if afraid I might explode at a moment’s notice.

“When is it going to happen?” I demand, trying to recall if I’ve seen any sort of invitation matching this description.

“In a couple of weeks.” Roger explains, “He’s planning another rogue attack for the same day, just to be sure you can’t get to her.”

I hear faint movement on the other side of my office door, and I hold up a finger to pause

Roger. He glances in the direction of the soft footsteps tiptoeing towards my door. Ella's scent comes fluttering through the wooden panel, and then a small shadow appears beneath the door jam. My lip quirks with exasperation and amusement. It would seem my little troublemaker is up from her nap, and she's taken it into her beautiful head to eavesdrop.

I move my finger to my lips, exchanging a knowing glance with Roger. I raise my voice slightly, just in case Ella's human hearing needs the volume. "I don't know, if I sell my baby after the campaign is over there's not much the council can do about it."

A soft, feminine gasp meets my ears and Roger smothers a laugh, covering it with a cough. "They can always call for another election, don't forget that's how we ended up in this situation in the first place."

"Maybe, but by then I'll have the army at my disposal." I counter, rising to my feet and moving as silently as I can across the floor.

"They won't stand a chance against me."

I abruptly swing the door open, startling Ella and throwing her off balance. Clearly she was leaning her weight into the door in order to hear better. I catch her slender wrists before she can tumble to the floor, though I'm currently of the opinion that her bottom could do with a bit of soreness.

"Well well, what have we here?" I rumble ominously. "It looks like one very naughty little spy."

Ella's wide eyes flash with emotion as she works through her predicament – processing her shock, fear, confusion and then outrage once she realizes our previous words were solely for her benefit. "You rat!" She exclaims finally, "that wasn't funny!"

"Oh I beg to differ." I reply, scooping her up into my arms. "I think you got exactly what you deserved."

I return to my chair, settling the defiant bundle in my lap. Ella huffs, glaring at me with all the ferocity and indignance she possesses. "Well from the sounds of it I should have been part of this conversation in the first place. You left me out again, Dominic!"

"You were asleep." I state pointedly. "And you need your rest. I had every intention of filling you in once you woke. If you'd knocked I would have gladly invited you in."

Ella deflates slightly, looking suddenly unsure of herself. "Really?"

"Yes, really." I confirm, closing my hand over her nape to let her feel my solid strength.

“You need to know these things as much as I do.”

“But... you were so determined not to worry me.” She argues, her voice very small now.

“That was before – before you helped me understand how it made you feel not to know what was happening in your own life.” I remind her, “And before I appreciated how much being informed would encourage you to be cautious.”

“Oh.” Ella murmurs, blushing deeply. “I’m sorry, I thought...”

“I know what you thought.” I answer, “But you don’t need to worry about that right now.” Just when she starts to relax, I lower my mouth to her ear, “We’ll deal with your bad behavior later.”

Ella shivers against me, her sweet scent growing warm and liquid. Roger rolls his eyes, “You two aren’t very subtle, you know that.”

“We’re not trying to be.” I smirk, loving the way she’s squirming anxiously against me. “Now, if you would please help my mischievous mate get up to speed, I’m sure she’d appreciate it.”

“Yes please,” Ella offers shyly, “I’m sorry I eavesdropped on your conversation.”

Roger shakes his head. “You two are really a pair, you know that?”

“We know.” I beam, pausing to kiss the soft spot behind Ella’s ear.

“Alright, well the bottom line is that you need to be very careful.” Roger sighs, “and you’re going to get an invitation for a women’s event in a couple of weeks. Whatever you do, you have to make an excuse not to attend. Accept the invitation, but pull out at the last second so that they don’t know you’re onto them. In the meantime, I can give you details about the rogue attack so you can stop it before it happens. But the Prince can’t find out I’m helping you or we’ll lose the inside track.”

“What is he planning on doing with me?” Ella inquires, cuddling closer to me for comfort.

Roger and I exchange a meaningful glance, and I imperceptibly shake my head. “You don’t need to worry about that.” Roger replies, “All you need to know is that you don’t want to fall into his hands– at any cost. Trust me when I tell you that if it comes to it and you have a choice between dying and being captured... choose death.”

Chapter 79 – Blackmail

Ella

“I’m very worried about this, Ella.” The doctor pronounces grimly. He’s just taken my blood pressure, and it’s the same high reading we recorded this morning with the home kit. “I know you’re in the middle of a campaign and you’re going through a lot, but you’ve got to find a way to de-stress. If you don’t, we’ll have to put you on bed rest.”

“Bed rest?” I repeat anxiously. “For how long?”

The doctor’s grave face speaks volume, “the duration of your pregnancy.”

Sinclair stiffens beside me, moving the hand at my nape to massage my tense shoulder muscles. “What can we do, other than avoiding high pressure situations?”

“I’m going to prescribe you some medicine that will be safe for you and the baby. Be sure to take it every day, and otherwise just keep up the things we’ve already talked about – healthy eating, regular exercise, activities you find calming or relaxing.” The doctor continues, listing off suggestions. “You can try meditation or breathing exercises, pregnancy yoga is getting very popular.

Sticking to a daily routine can really help when things are uncertain and you’re going through all these changes. And Alpha, help her however you can.”

“The instructor at our parenting class advised us not to coddle our mates– is that still good advice given Ella’s risk level?” Sinclair inquires.

“Yes.” The doctor agrees, smashing the small surge of hope I’d felt to pieces. “Human or wolf, your mate needs to feel like you’re in control, especially in cases like this where so much is out of your hands. She needs you to ground her if she starts to spiral –

to show her she can rely on you no matter what.”

I can’t see the logic underpinning his words, but I still don’t like it. What’s so wrong with a bit of coddling? I’ve never been coddled in my entire life. As if he can read my thoughts, Sinclair’s warm breath flutters over my neck, “Just remember how much you hated it when I kept you out of the loop, trying to protect you.”

Oh. I guess I have been coddled after all. I’m about to acknowledge this, but when I look up at Sinclair, he’s smiling at me so affectionately that my heart stops beating. “Besides,” He continues indulgently. “Just because I don’t coddle you, doesn’t mean I can’t pamper you the way you deserve.”

I find myself giggling like a schoolgirl, and the doctor steps out, clearly feeling as though

he's intruding on something even though we're only talking. When we get home, Sinclair tucks me in for a nap and returns to work, making me promise to call on the servants if I need anything and vowing to be home as early as he can.

I sleep fitfully. Even exhausted as I am, I find it very difficult to sleep without Sinclair. I swear he's becoming like my security blanket – my body won't relax fully unless he's with me and my nightmares always surge in his absence. I'm getting too attached to him. I think sadly, climbing out of bed after half an hour of tossing and turning.

So? The little voice in my head challenges. He's the baby's father – he's going to be in your life forever. Why not get attached?

Because he won't always be in my life in this way. He's not going to be sleeping with me when he finds his second chance mate

– and I have to be able to survive on my own. I can't become so codependent that I need him to take care of me. I answer ruefully.

Maybe he won't find his mate at all. The voice suggests, sounding much too hopeful for my liking.

I scoff at my own naivete, get it together, Ella! You can't start thinking that way – it's just asking for heartbreak.

I've only just opened the door to go downstairs and find an afternoon snack when one of the guards appears at the top of the stairwell. "Luna, there's a visitor for you."

"Really?" I stop in my tracks. "Who is it? I wasn't expecting anyone."

"She says you used to work for her." He shrugs. "I tried to get her name but she wouldn't tell me. Should I make her leave?"

I pause, knowing Sinclair wouldn't like the idea of an unidentified woman entering his home. I don't like the idea myself –

especially after Roger's warning. "What does she look like?"

"Tall, dark hair, tan skin – maybe 40?" He lowers his voice to a whisper. "She's human."

My stomach sinks, it does sound like a former employer and if she's human then it's probably true. In fact, she sounds like the heartless woman who fired me so callously after I tried to beg Sinclair for Cora's job. "No, let her in. I'll speak to her."

Be nice, I instruct myself sternly. Maybe she came to apologize, don't be rude just

because you're feelings were hurt.

When I get downstairs, Jake and Millie's mother is gazing around Sinclair's sitting room, a hungry gaze on her face. She looks me up and down as I enter, something distinctly spiteful in her open perusal. She speaks before I can say a word of welcome.

"Well, you've certainly come up in the world, Ella. Lord only knows what you had to do to wiggle your way into Dominic Sinclair's bed."

"What are you doing here?" I inquire, no longer feeling any need to play nice. She clearly set the tone of this conversation and though I'm sorely tempted to kick her out now, I need to find out what she wants first.

"Well when I saw your picture plastered across the society section of the paper I could scarcely believe it. I had to come and find out if the rumors were true." She explains simply.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes, the media firestorm my relationship with Sinclair created clearly didn't stop with the shifter news.

Everyone in the human world thought Sinclair was just a handsome billionaire, and he was still a public figure for all his philanthropic work. I should have realized this might happen – my social circle had been very small before discovering the werewolf world and most of the people from my past wouldn't have any reason to be suspicious of my relationship with Sinclair.

This woman, however, knows exactly how at odds I was with my pup's father in the beginning.

"Well now that you've seen that they were true, you can be leaving." I suggest, knowing there must be more to this.

"Oh no, I think you and I have much to discuss, Ella." Her eyes are locked on the curve of my belly. "It's no wonder you were begging outside his gate that day. No doubt trying to get a bit of money out of him to take care of your little problem?"

"My baby isn't a problem." I insist. "And I didn't even know I was pregnant then. I was asking for help on behalf of my sister – she was going to lose her job over a misunderstanding, ironically enough."

My ex-employer studies me for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not she believes. After a pregnant pause, she snorts.

"So what, you thought because you spread your legs for him he would fall at your feet?"

She guesses, drawing the wrong conclusion. Shaking her head, she arches a brow. “Though I have to give you credit for not giving up when you realized he’d knocked you up. Very enterprising – for a common whore.”

My jaw drops, “Excuse me?”

“I always knew there was something off about you. It never made sense why you wanted to chase after my brats all day anyway.

Now I see the brilliance of your plan.” She nods at my small baby bump. “You were probably selling yourself all over that neighborhood, just waiting for exactly this sort of ‘accident.’”

“Are you suggesting...” I can’t even say the words, unable to believe my ears.

“How much did you charge him anyway?” She questions, venom dripping from her tongue. “I suppose being so beautiful meant you were able to attract clients far above your station, still, it seems backwards that he should be the one to pay for a night with you. And now you’ve won the lottery by conceiving his bastard.”

I’m not sure what upsets me more, hearing her call my pup names, or her accusations about me charging Sinclair for sex. “You come here and insult my baby, then accuse me of being a prostitute, and you think I’m just going to sit here and take it?” I demand fiercely. “You’re not just cruel – you’re delusional. Get out of my house this instant.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” She hisses in return. “Not without a check.”

The room is spinning around me, “You expect me to pay you? Why, to keep you from spreading these lies?”

“I think the tabloids would be very interested in what I could tell them about you.” She smirks. “They’re painting you two as some sort of fairytale romance – just imagine the headlines if they realized you’re nothing but a disgraced nanny who couldn’t even hold onto her job because she was too busy whoring around for wealthy men.”

I grit my teeth, trying to slow my racing thoughts enough to process this. I don’t particularly care what the human papers say about me, and I have enough good references from past jobs to refute what she’s saying. But that isn’t the problem. The real problem is that if the shifter media learns I was here in Moon Valley, working as a nanny for a human family in Sinclair’s neighborhood and not off in the bloodbane pack, they’ll figure out I’m human. If the truth comes out about my real identity, all our lies will be exposed, and the Campaign will be over faster than we can blink. The Prince will win, and the entire realm will be in danger – not to mention that my baby’s life will practically be forfeit.

I have to talk to Sinclair, I have to find a way to stop her.

“Give me twenty four hours.”

Chapter 80 – Roger Learns a Secret

Ella

“What!” Sinclair roars through the phone receiver, his deep voice full of such rage and aggression that it makes me flinch. I’ve just told him about every horrible moment of my conversation with my former employer – though now it’s probably more accurate to think of her as my blackmailer.

I’ll have to change her contact information in my phone to reflect her new title – I can even assign her an ominous ringtone. I fight down the urge to laugh at this insane thought, wondering why my brain always twists the darkest moments of my life into humor.

There is nothing funny about this situation.

“I don’t know what to do.” I whimper. “I don’t care what she says about me—” I’m interrupted by a low snarl, Sinclair’s wolf’s wordless insistence that he cares even if I don’t. “but if she sells this story then everyone will realize I’m human.”

“I’ll kill her.” He rumbles, overflowing with menace. “She won’t find it so easy to speak such filth when her head is no longer connected to her body.”

“You can’t!” I object, still feeling as though he’s missing the point. “That will only call more attention to her – there will be an investigation into her life and eventually they’ll want to interview me. My identity is bound to get out if that happens. Also, you know – murder is wrong, Dominic.”

“She threatened you.” He growls, as if I’ve forgotten. “And there won’t be an investigation if I make it look like an accident. You’d be amazed how many car accidents result in decapitations.”

“Blackmail hardly warrants an execution, and you can’t go around ripping the heads off everyone who is mean to me.” I insist, overwhelmed that this surreal conversation is actually occurring. “You’re supposed to be setting a good example for our son.”

“The example I’ll be setting is how to protect one’s mate from vile, conniving, despicable, foul—”

“Dominic!” I interrupt, raising my voice over his increasing volatile grumbling. “She has children who love her – she may not deserve their love, but if you kill her, they’ll suffer. Jake and Millie don’t deserve that.”

“They’d probably be better off without her.” Sinclair suggests sullenly, his voice shifting then, as if a new idea is occurring to him.

“We could even take them in – adopt them. I know you miss them... just think, we could have three children instead of one.”

“Oh really, are you going to kill their father too?” I inquire waspishly, shaking my head.

“That depends.” Sinclair replies hopefully, “would you be okay with that?”

“I don’t think I really appreciated how bloodthirsty shifters are about their families until now.” I tell Cora a little while later. “The ridiculous wolf actually thought he could win me over to his plan by waving those precious babies under my nose. It was like trying to talk a hungry jackal out of his dinner.”

“I mean he wasn’t completely off base.” Cora jokes, “if it was possible to convince you, bribing you with children is probably how I’d go about it too.”

“Well I told him that he wasn’t allowed to rip any heads off under any circumstances.” I counter.

Cora snorts, “I bet he took that really well.”

“Oh he grumbled and complained, but he got over it.” I laugh, leaving out the part where he threatened to come home and ‘spank my sassy bottom’ until I agreed to his violent plan. That is not the sort of detail I want my sister to know.

“So what’s he going to do?” My sister inquires curiously, sitting across from me in the same parlor where my blackmailer threatened me two hours ago. I called her and asked her to come over after getting off the phone with Sinclair, in desperate need of some moral support.

“He told me not to worry and that he’d take care of it.” I sigh. “I doubt he’ll pay her, but if he can get Mike to turn himself in to the police, he can probably convince her not to make good on her promise.”

“Are you okay with that?” Cora wonders aloud, “I wouldn’t think you’d be comfortable trusting someone else with something so important.”

“I trust Dominic.” I admit, blushing shyly. Cora understands better than anyone what a momentous statement this is for me. She knows I’ve always had to rely on myself, and that I’ve never felt safe relying on anyone else because of far too many bad experiences. “Honestly I felt better just talking to him about it. I know he’ll fix this, and my only concern is that he’ll lose his temper and go overboard protecting us.”

The baby kicks softly, as if he agrees. “Quick, come here!” I exclaim, waving Cora over. She does, and I pull her palm to my belly.

The baby is still now, so I murmur encouragement at my tummy. “Come on Rafe, say hello to your Aunt Cora.”

At the sound of his name, the pup complies, and Cora and I both squeal. She hugs me tightly then, “You’re glowing you know that? I’ve never seen you so happy – and correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think it’s just becoming a Mom.”

“You’re not wrong.” I confess, grinning despite myself. “I am happy, even with all the danger and the drama. I didn’t know it was possible to feel this way.”

Cora shakes her head, eyes shining. “God you should see your smile, Elle. I swear I could kiss Dominic.”

I’m amazed to feel a stab of jealousy when she mentions kissing Sinclair, even though I know it’s only an expression. “You don’t think it’s completely deranged?” I ask shyly. “I mean rogues keep popping up and trying to kill me, and a horrible heartless woman is blackmailing me. It seems crazy to be happy in spite of all that.”

“Ella,” She says seriously, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. “Do you really think it’s crazy, or do you just feel like you don’t deserve to be happy?”

Her words cut me to the core, and I find myself staring at my hands. I ponder her question for a few seconds, shrugging. “I mean, do I deserve it? Not fishing for compliments, not feeling sorry for myself – but what have I done in my life to deserve so much prosperity? In a few months I could be as good as a Queen, even if it is only temporary.”

“Ella, the rich and powerful don’t end up that way because of merit!” Cora argues. “How many of the people running the world actually worked to get where they are? Everyone deserves to be happy... well maybe not the Prince or your old boss, but you do! You might not have done anything remarkable yet, but you’ve also never hurt anyone! You’ve never ruined lives for your own selfish promotion.”

“I haven’t been a complete saint.” I remind her. “I mean I’ve stolen and broken laws, I’m lying to millions of people even as we speak.”

“You stole when we were children. You broke laws to survive and to keep me alive, to protect the other orphans. You’ve taken care of people your whole life and you kept doing it for work because you love it so much. And you’re lying to people so that you can protect them from a monster. You’re still taking care of people now, and you’re risking

your life to do it. Trust me Ella, you deserve all the prosperity and all the happiness in the world.”

I peek over at my sister, my throat scratching with unshed tears. Looking at her beloved face, I find the strength to ask a question I've been too afraid to ask until now. “What if I can't do it?”

“Do what, be queen?” She clarifies, her brow furrowed.

“Or any of it? I mean I'm just a human – every day I learn about something else I had no idea existed. And after the baby comes I'm going to lose its scent. What if I can't keep up the act? Or what if I can, but I make some horrible mistake because of my ignorance? I'm going to be responsible for so many people, what if I screw up and someone gets hurt as a result?” I question, swiping at my lashes to keep the tears from falling.

“You're not in this alone, Ella.” Cora murmurs. “Dominic is going to be helping you every step of the way, and so are his people –

so will I, in any way I can. You don't have to bear all the responsibility yourself anymore – those days are over.”

I hiccup, nodding and trying to get my breathing under control. “Thank you.” I sniffle. “I needed to hear that.”

Just then a creak sounds on the other side of the door, and I realize we aren't alone. I quickly cross the floor, pulling the door open before our eavesdropper can get away. I suppose this is payback for my own spying the other day, but I'm horrified when I realize who was listening.

It's Roger, and he's just heard every single word of my conversation.

Chapter 81 – Roger Makes a Promise

Ella

I haven't been sick for a few days now, but when I see Roger standing on the other side of the door I immediately turn to one of the ornamental vases in the hallway and empty my stomach. Cora rushes forward to help me, glancing uncertainly at Roger as she pulls my hair back from my face.

I know that Sinclair and Roger are on better terms since the wild hunt, but I also know that their peace is very tenuous. Sinclair hasn't decided whether or not he truly trusts his brother yet, and though Roger has been helpful bringing intelligence from the Prince's camp, he could easily be playing the double agent for both sides – and now he knows my deepest, darkest secret.

This is so bad. I think frantically. He told the Prince that Sinclair hadn't marked me, what if he tells him this too? Forget the blackmail – Roger is more dangerous to me than some bitter ex-employer could ever be!

I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth, straightening with a pitiful moan. I look over at Roger, finding his expression a combination of confusion and concern. "You'd better come in."

"Ella, I'm sorry." He begins hesitantly. "I didn't mean to startle you, and I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. I came over to check in with Sinclair and... well it wasn't difficult to overhear your conversation."

"I know, I know – your shifter hearing is very acute." I grumble. "Trust me, I'm learning just how out of my depth I am every day."

"I don't understand." Roger admits, following me into the sitting room. "How is this even possible?"

I sit down, graciously accepting a glass of water from my sister. "Listen, I'll tell you the truth, but only if you promise me that this conversation stays between us. I know you're been helping us lately, but I'm going to be honest – I'm not convinced you're actually on our side."

"That's fair." Roger admits, looking drawn and pale. "After what I did... I know I don't deserve your trust, or your forgiveness."

"Well I'm sure I don't need to tell you what would happen if this information got out. The only people who know are servants of this house, and my doctor. Not even Henry knows the truth, because if this becomes public information Sinclair's campaign will be over. The Prince will become King, thousands would die under his tyranny – including me and

your nephew.” I remark pointedly, holding my hand to my baby bump. “I don’t care what kind of sibling rivalry you have, or how strongly you think you should have Alpha – if you endanger my baby’s life, you won’t only have Sinclair to deal with – I’ll kill you myself.”

“Ella!” Cora exclaims, shocked by my aggression. In truth I’ve shocked myself, but those primal Mama Bear instincts that started coming out at the ball are back in full force, and I don’t regret a single word I’ve spoken. I would do anything to protect my child, including killing to keep him safe.

“It’s okay.” Roger assures her. “You’re very spirited for a human. I can see why Sinclair picked you.” He stares me in the eye, holding the contact as he makes his next promise. “And you have my word that I’ll take this secret to my grave – I swear it on my mother’s grave.”

“Good.” I nod, feeling a bit more relaxed now. “But you’re wrong if you think Sinclair picked me. This all started as a rather wild accident.”

“An accident?” Roger repeats, his brow knitting with confusion.

“It was my fault really.” Cora admits, relating the mix up at the sperm bank. Of course, her confession only leads to more questions, about why I went to the sperm bank in the first place, and how we figured out Sinclair’s sample had been used instead of the donor I chose. When he hears about Mike, I’m amazed to see how outraged he looks in my honor – I suppose messing with one’s fertility is a grave offense among wolves, even more so than with humans.

“So you still don’t know how the samples got switched?” Roger presses, after we move past the Mike of it all.

“No.” Cora and I say in unison. “The surveillance cameras were disabled in the lab – before the samples were switched. And of course we don’t film in the exam rooms.”

“What?” I inquire, “this is the first I’m hearing of the security cameras being tampered with.”

“That’s one of the reasons they eventually let me off the hook.” Cora informs me. “Sinclair ordered them to hire me back, but the investigation didn’t actually move away from me as a suspect until they found the tapes were blank during your appointment. I don’t have access to the surveillance monitors.”

“Does that mean...” I can hardly wrap my brain around this. “We’ve been assuming this was an accident all along, and I could even understand someone erasing them after the fact to cover their mistake... but if someone turned the cameras off before the switch then it must have been on purpose.”

“But why would anyone try to inseminate a human?” Roger questions, aghast. “I mean no shifter I know would imagine it was possible for you to actually conceive. I still can’t believe it myself.”

“I don’t know how it was possible – and honestly I don’t care. This baby is a miracle for me whether it’s a human, or a wolf.” I shrug, though in truth I feel quite uneasy. “But it does make me nervous to think someone might have done this to us. Even if they knew I could conceive, what was their goal? I highly doubt anyone would do this just to make my dreams of becoming a mother – or Dominic’s of becoming a father – come true.”

“True.” Cora nods sympathetically, “I have a hard time thinking their motives were pure, but I also don’t see an opportunity for malice either. How does you having a shifter baby help anyone?”

“This has to be the weirdest crime in history.” I express, absolutely flabbergasted.

“Cora, who has access to both your labs and the security rooms, and who else knew you had Dominic’s sperm?” Roger asks, obviously as curious as we are.

“My bosses.” Cora shrugs, “but they’re also the ones running the investigation. Sinclair has some of his men on it as well, but as far as I know, no one has ever been arrested or charged.”

“I can ask him about it once he comes home.” I suggest, “with everything else going on, I sort of forgot about all this, but I bet he hasn’t.”

“You can count on that.” Roger confirms, cocking his head to the side. “So what happens after the baby comes? You mentioned losing its scent. Has Sinclair talked to you about his plans for keeping your identity secret?”

“We’re just trying to get through the campaign.” I explain, blushing to think of everything he must have overheard. “Afterwards I can step back from the public eye and... I don’t know, we’ll take it from there. If he has plans he hasn’t talked to me about them, but I trust we’ll think of something.”

Roger is staring at me with an unreadable expression, and for a moment I assume he’s judging me. “What?” I ask softly, “You think I’m being too optimistic? Or too trusting?”

“No.” He counters, shaking his head with a look of begrudging respect. “I was actually thinking that you’re incredibly brave to be doing this, and incredibly generous to be helping Dom. You must have been so overwhelmed when he asked for your help,” He clenches his eyes shut, and for some reason I think I sense some guilt when he continues, “and Goddess, those rogue attacks...”

you must have been so terrified.”

“Actually it was her suggestion to pose as Luna.” Cora boasts, focusing on the less traumatic portion of Roger’s statement. I smile at her, thankful she’s looking out for me this way. She grins back, continuing. “He only wanted her as a surrogate at first, but she proved how valuable she could be to him.”

Roger shakes his head, frowning deeply. “I’m so sorry, Ella.”

“For what?” I ask, confused.

“For being so cruel to you. For helping the Prince. If I’d known... I never would have... I’m just so sorry.” Roger professes, looking completely genuine.

“Well, that’s all ancient history now.” I exhale heavily, wondering how much harder it must have been for Sinclair to forgive his brother after all their history, when I find it difficult after only just meeting him. “As long as you’re on our side from here on out – I don’t care about the past.”

“You are too kind for your own good, you know that?” Roger asks, huffing out a laugh. There’s a spark of true admiration in his eyes, a spark that looks dangerously close to attraction as his gaze sweeps from my face and scans my figure.

“I keep trying to tell her that.” Cora declares. “Much good that it does me. She’s a stubborn thing.”

“Well I might be, but I’m not sure Dominic is going to be so calm when he finds out you know my secret.” I advise honestly. “You might want to leave before he gets home – let me break it to him.”

“That’s probably wise.” Roger agrees, rising to his feet. “I really am sorry, Ella.”

“I know.” I nod. “Now go – he’ll be here any moment.”

Chapter 82 – Sinclair Takes on a Blackmailer

Sinclair

When I arrive at the home of Ella's former employer, it takes all my strength to push my wolf down deep. The last thing I need is to actually murder a human, no matter how badly I might want to.

She deserves it. My wolf mutters mutinously, think about how easy it would be. Then she'd never be able to hurt Ella again.

Maybe so, but Ella wouldn't like it. I remind him, recalling how the precious creature had worried for the children, even when her own safety and happiness was on the line.

Hmph, she's got you wrapped around her little finger. My wolf accuses.

Oh, like she doesn't have you in the exact same position? I scoff. I'd like to see you resist her when she's blinking those beautiful big eyes up at you, begging you not to orphan innocent children.

Please, you spoke over the phone! He reminds me, his voice trailing off into growls of longing as he pictures her. You couldn't see her eyes or those plump, pouty lips or the sweet swell of her belly. You couldn't smell her delectable scent or...

And I'm the one who's whipped? I roll my eyes as I knock on the heavy rosewood door.

To my surprise, Jake and Millie answer the door, tilting their blonde heads up to me with excited grins. "Mr. Sinclair!"

My wolf calms as soon as he sees the children, softening like the big teddy bear he is. "Well hello!" I drop down to their level, unable to resist their adorable smiles. "I haven't seen you two in ages, what have you been up to?"

"We have a new nanny." Millie whispers conspiratorially, reaching out to play with my tie.

"She never takes us on walks in the neighborhood." Jake explains, clearly blaming his new carer for our increasingly infrequent meetings. "She's too lazy and she hates being outside."

"That's too bad." I commiserate, pulling Millie into my arms and lifting her up as I ruffle Jake's hair affectionately. "Doesn't she know growing boys and girls need to get out and explore?"

"I don't think so." Millie frowns seriously. "She's not very smart."

"I miss Ella." Jake adds miserably. "Mommy's been saying lots of mean things about her, but we don't believe her. Ella was the best nanny we've ever had."

"Well I know Ella misses you too." I confide. "You know she's living with me now?"

"She is?" Jake gapes. "You mean you get to play with her all day long?"

"Whenever you wants?" Millie adds in awe.

"Well, not whenever I want." I confess. If only they knew how badly I'd like to stay home with Ella all day, both playing and not playing. "My job keeps me very busy, but she's there in the morning and when I get home at night. She tells me how badly she wants to see you."

"Maybe you can convince Mommy to let her visit?" Jake suggests, staring up at me so hopefully I feel guilty for thinking that nothing I could possibly say to their horrible mother will make her come around.

"I can try." I promise, patting the boy on the shoulder, "and you two should know you're welcome at my home anytime."

Maybe we should get rid of their mother after all. My wolf insinuates in my head. Think how happy Ella would be if we brought them home with us.

I'm not stealing children just to make Ella smile. I argue, tempting as it may be.

Spoilsport. His objections are interrupted when Jake and Millie's mother appears at the top of the stairs. She stops dead when she sees me. Her face pales, but she plasters on a phony smile. "Mr. Sinclair, to what do we owe this honor?"

"You and I need to speak." I answer coldly, surprising the children. I set Millie on the ground, smiling widely so that they know my harsh tone is not directed at them. "Your Mommy and I need a few minutes alone, but I'll come say goodbye, before I leave. I promise."

Their mother calls for the nanny, her voice very shrill. The children are swept away by a middle aged woman with a grim face, and I'm struck by how uninterested she seems in her charges. She doesn't even speak to them as she leads them out of the room.

"Well, Mr. Sinclair, what can I help you with?" Ella's blackmailer questions, as if she doesn't already know why I'm here. She guides me into a parlor, gesturing towards a plush couch. "Please, have a seat."

“No.” I declare firmly. “Call me crazy, but I don’t think false politeness is appropriate when you’re threatening my family.”

Her eyes go wide, and her heart rate increases, racing violently in her chest. “I—I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Do not lie to me.” I growl, letting some of my wolf’s ferocity bleed into my voice. The woman reels back, shivering for reasons she doesn’t understand. She may have the dull intuition of a human, but even humans know when they’re in the presence of a lethal predator intent on destroying them.

“Please, it wasn’t what you think!” She lies, her voice unsteady and choking with defiance.

“Oh I’d like to hear this.” I state ominously, prowling towards her. “I’d like to know what kind of twisted logic made you think it would be wise to try and blackmail the most powerful man on the continent.”

“But I wasn’t blackmailing you!” She immediately objects, too stupid to realize that I wouldn’t be nearly this angry if I had been her target. “I only wanted people to see that grasping little gold digger –”

“If you have any brains in that foolish head of yours, you’ll stop while you’re ahead.” I interrupt, clenching my hands into fists.

“You may have no sense of loyalty yourself, but where I come from, if you threaten one member of the family you threaten all of them. If you insult one, you insult them all.”

“But that isn’t, I would never –”

“Let me tell you the situation you’re in.” I cut her off again, my voice as deep as it can become without devolving into wordless snarls. “You first fired my fiancée when she did nothing wrong. You deprived your own children of the most loving caregiver they could ever hope for. You spread rumors among your friends to ensure Ella wouldn’t be able to find another job.” The wretched woman is cowering against the wall now, having backed away from me until she could move no further.

I don’t show her any mercy, I continue stalking until I’m towering over her. “Now if it had been up to me, I would have destroyed you for that alone, but not Ella. She’s much too good, not that you ever saw that. So I agreed to let you go on living your obscenely prosperous life without interference.”

I can smell her fear – sour and acrid. “But then you learned that despite your efforts to ruin Ella’s life, she found happiness with me. Now I don’t know if you’re just so bitter and

heartless that you couldn't stand to see a hard-working young woman succeed, or if you saw my fortune and decided to try and steal part of it for yourself. But either way, you came into my home and called the mother of my child a cheap whore. You threatened to spread your lies in the tabloids. You tried to extort a man who could take away your wealth and your freedom with a single snap of my fingers, and you hurt the woman I love."

I'm sure my wolf is glowing in my eyes, and suddenly the aroma of urine fills the air. I can see the hot liquid running down the woman's stockings, and my adrenaline spikes with the knowledge that my prey is well and truly cornered. "You also alienated the only person who was protecting you from my wrath in the first place."

"I'm sorry!" She sobs, shaking like a leaf. "I was a fool, I don't know what I was thinking. I'll do anything, just please don't hurt me."

"Shut up, you stupid cow." I bite. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not even going to ruin your life, because Ella still loves your children even though they've got a worthless hag for a mother. But mark my words, if I ever see you near my family again, I will destroy you."

I proclaim, speaking with absolute conviction. "If the lies you tried to blackmail us with ever get out, if a single word of your vitriol makes it to a tabloid editor— whether you are the source or not — I will take away everything you care about in the world."

She nods, sobbing and snivelling like a child. "I-I promise. You have my word."

"Good." I growl, starting to turn away. "And for the record, you absolute idiot — I own stock in every press outlet and newspaper from here to the coast. No one will ever publish a story about me without asking for my permission first. You think about that before you ever consider trying to get your story out as leverage against me."

She sinks to the ground, and I leave her to wallow in her own shame and piss. I keep my promise of course, I go to wish the children farewell, and go home to tell Ella the news.

Chapter 83 – Ella Talks Down a Wolf

Sinclair

It's dark out by the time I get home, and I follow my nose upstairs to Ella's room. She's just stepping out of the shower when I walk in, her dripping body wrapped in a fluffy towel. Her rose gold hair is still dry, piled on top of her head and held secure with a pair of chop sticks.

She startles slightly when she sees me sitting on her bed, then rolls her eyes and huffs. "If you're going to move around as silently as a ghost, would you at least announce yourself when you enter rooms, Dominic?"

I chuckle softly, raking my eyes over her wet skin. "Is that any way to greet your knight in shining armor?"

Ella steps forward before she can think to hide her nervous curiosity. "What happened?"

"Come give me a kiss hello, and I'll tell you." I invite, holding my arms open to her. Her muscles relax when she sees my easy mood, and she rolls her eyes again, smiling now. I growl playfully at her sass, and Ella quivers visibly, her thighs clenching reflexively beneath the hem of her towel.

Ella crosses the floor, flushing prettily as she comes to stand between my legs. Her pink lips pucker, and she leans into my warmth, giving every indication that she's about to brush her mouth over my own. However at the last moment she redirects, skirting away from my waiting lips and attempting to drop a kiss on my cheek. She doesn't get very far – clearly the mischievous human forgot to account for shifter speed when she formed this plan. I intercept her mouth with my own, claiming her lips and rumbling my disapproval.

Ella giggles softly, even as I tease the seam of her lips with my tongue, and flip her onto the bed. My clothes grow damp as her towel slips away and the liquid dotting her skin absorbs into the cloth of my shirt and trousers. I slant my lips over hers, delving into her sweet mouth and coaxing her tongue into a dance. Her arms and legs wrap around me in welcome, and I'm sorely tempted to strip so that I can feel her every inch of her naked body against my own.

I pull the pins from Ella's hair, letting it fall down around her face and sending her lovely scent fluttering into the air around us. I continue stealing kiss after kiss, caressing Ella's sides and silky thighs, dragging the sweetest sounds from her lips. My wolf purrs in reply, and I graze my scruffy jaw over the soft skin of her cheek, changing her contented murmurs into a fresh burst of giggles.

Chuckling with dark, sexual intent, I bury my face into her neck and give the velvety swath of skin the same treatment. Pausing to explore the abraded territory with my tongue, I drag one large palm over her round bottom. Squeezing her lush rear end, I continue kissing my way down to her chest. Ella's breath catches as I brush my fangs over the swell of her breast, then yelps in surprise when I nip her sensitive flesh.

"That's for not letting me kill that horrible woman in your honor." I inform her, moving my mouth to the other breast to give it the same treatment. "That's for rolling your eyes at me." This time the playful bite is met with a moan, and her nipples harden into tight buds – dangerously close to my questing lips. Not trusting myself not to suck one of the sweet buds into my mouth, I finish my rebuke with a single swat to her behind. "And that's for trying to withhold kisses I earned fair and square."

"I still haven't heard how you earned them." Ella argues cheekily, squirming against me and making the quickly stiffening member between my legs strain against my zipper. I pull away from her slightly, pushing up onto my elbow to gaze down at her, and wondering if this was actually a bigger mistake. At least when she was flush against me I couldn't see her many charms.

"Well, you don't have to worry about being blackmailed ever again." I assure her, looking down into her lovely face and wondering if there's ever been anyone so irresistible. "At least, not from your former employer."

"Really?" Ella inquires, eyes bright as she props herself up too.

"Really," I confirm, brushing a few stray locks of hair back from her face. "I also saw Jake and Millie. I told them how much you miss them, and they told me all about how horrible their new nanny is."

Her face falls, and suddenly I regret sharing this particular detail. "Did they seem very unhappy?" Ella asks anxiously.

"They seemed as sweet as ever." I share, "and I don't think they're being mistreated. I think she's just not any fun."

Ella nods thoughtfully, peeking up at me from beneath her long, dark lashes. "How did you convince her to drop the story?"

"It wasn't hard." I explain, watching the progress of my fingers as I trace them down her arm, leaving a trail of gooseflesh in their wake. "I simply made sure she realized how foolish it was to threaten a man as powerful as I am. Her imagination did all the rest, but I still would have liked to kill her."

"Well I'm glad you didn't." Ella replies firmly. "We don't need to be inviting more trouble

to our doorstep.”

“Oh I agree.” I muse, laughter obvious in my voice as I move my hand to her belly. “My hands are plenty full with you and this little one.”

“Our baby is not trouble.” Ella objects, narrowing her eyes at me.

“Oh I don’t know about that.” I tease. “With you for a mother? I’d say he’s bound to have a mischievous streak a mile wide –

though we won’t have to worry about that for some time.”

“And I suppose you were always perfectly well behaved?” Ella counters, arching one smooth brow. “I ought to ask Henry how you were as a boy. I bet he has all sorts of stories to share.”

“I was an absolute angel.” I lie, trying my best to sound self-righteous.

“I don’t believe that for a single second.” Ella laughs.

“You hear that, Rafe?” I ask our son, beaming when a little kick pulses in Ella’s tummy, right on the other side of my hand. “As if your Mommy hasn’t been naughty enough today – now she’s calling me a liar.”

“Dominic?” Ella’s serious tone pulls my eyes up to her face. “Something else happened today, while you were out.”

“What?” I press, sensing that she’s not merely trying to distract me from our flirting.

“Well Cora came over and I was talking to her about everything that’s been going on.” Ella begins slowly, not meeting my gaze.

“And well... the short version is that Roger came over while she was here. He heard part of our conversation and... he knows I’m human.”

“What!?” I explode, surging to my feet.

Ella immediately scrambles out of bed after me. Her tiny hands close around my arms, as if she’s afraid I’m going to run out on her. “It’s okay, he stayed and we talked. I explained the situation and he honestly seemed to listen. He promised not to tell – ever.

He apologized for everything that’s happened, and the only reason he left is because I made him. I thought you should hear it from me.”

“Ella, why didn’t you tell me sooner!” I demand, trying not to lose my temper. “I’m not convinced that Roger is actually on our side and with this information, the Prince could end my campaign like that,” I say, snapping my fingers.

“I know, but you only just got home, and I wanted to hear how things went at Jake and Millie’s.” Her face twists into an accusatory stare, “And I’m not the one who got us all sidetracked with kisses.”

Sighing, I acknowledge that I didn’t give her much chance to tell me this latest development. “What exactly did Roger say?”

“Well, we talked about how it happened and Cora explained that the surveillance footage was tampered with – which I didn’t even know about until today.” Ella shares, an open question in her expression.

I nod, “I knew, but we still aren’t any close to understanding who was behind this– or what they were hoping to achieve.”

“Well, Roger just kind of talked through the possibilities with us and everything. He seemed to really regret helping the Prince, I mean I actually thought he looked as though he felt guilty about working against us.” Ella conveys softly, her hands stroking my arms in long, steady movements – clearly intended to calm me.

“He should.” I mutter bleakly. Ella doesn’t know that Roger helped orchestrate the attack in the alley, and unless Roger becomes a problem, I don’t see a reason to tell her. It would only hurt her feelings, and if Roger is truly on our side then I don’t want more space between them. “And I think you’re probably right. I trust your judgement. But I need to go see him, just to be sure.”

“You won’t hurt him, will you?” Ella presses.

“No sweetheart, I promise I’m in control.” I vow. “Just give me a couple of hours. I’ll go talk to Roger and then I’ve got that bloody,

‘have a drink with the Alpha’ event – but I’ll be home by dinner. We can have a nice night together and forget all this ever happened.”

“Okay.” She agrees, stepping away from me. “I’ll see you soon, then.”

Of course, if I’d known then what I know now... I would never have left the house that night. I would have stayed home with Ella and blown off my brother and the campaign. I could have saved us all a lot of trouble if I had.

Chapter 84 – Sinclair Makes a Detour

Sinclair

When I reach Roger's house, he's not the least bit surprised to find me darkening his doorway. "I was wondering when you were gonna show up." He quips, opening the door wide to welcome me inside.

"Am I that predictable?" I grouse, stepping over the threshold.

"No- I still wasn't sure whether or not you'd rip my head off after you arrived." Roger shares wryly.

"You've been talking with Ella." I assess coolly, recalling the sweet human's objection to me using this precise tactic against our enemies.

Roger snorts. "Not necessary. I grew up with you, I know your MO, brother."

"Well you have Ella to thank for my even temper either way. She seems to trust you'll keep your word and protect her secret." I explain, eyeing him suspiciously.

"And you came to find out if she's right." Roger guesses.

"Is she?" I inquire. "Or is this another one of your tricks?"

"It's not a trick." Roger states simply, leading me into his study. "But I'm not doing it for you – I'm doing it for her."

I absorb this information slowly. It does seem easier to believe my brother would help a stranger sooner than he'd help me, but there's also something in his tone, some unspoken emotion I don't quite understand. "Why do you care what happens to her?" I inquire.

"Because she's exactly what you've been saying she is all along. She's brave and clever and good to her very core. Goddess only knows how you managed to get her, but you certainly don't deserve her." Roger replies, giving me a begrudging look that tells me he's only half joking.

My wolf growls possessively in my head, he likes her.

Good, if he likes her he'll help us. I answer evenly.

But she's mine. My wolf argues fiercely. He shouldn't even be allowed to look at her.

Would you get a hold of yourself? I admonish.

I won't share her! The stubborn predator is digging in his heels, making my hackles raise and claws extend. This is why we need to claim her, so that other wolves won't come sniffing around our mate.

You're acting like a child. I'm losing my temper now, sick and tired of being at odds with my inner animal. She isn't our mate and I'm not going to hurt her with a claiming mark her body can't handle. Besides, even if Roger is interested in Ella, she isn't interested in him. Have some self-respect.

"I haven't got her – not the way you mean." I correct, shaking myself out of my inner conflict. "She's been adamant about that –

she's only interested in me as her baby's father." I share, deciding that my brother doesn't need to know how complicated my relationship with Ella truly is.

Roger snorts, "Who are you kidding? That woman is clearly infatuated with you, and I know you want her for keeps. Your wolf is bloody besotted."

"She's carrying my pup, that's changing both of us, neither of us can trust our feelings right now." I reason, using the same logic with him that I've been employing to justify my own restraint. If I let myself believe that everything happening between Ella and I is real, there will be no holding my wolf back, and I don't want to frighten or push her into something she doesn't truly want, or isn't ready for.

"You know as well as I do that pregnancy can't magically make people fall in love, even if they're already interested in each other." Roger scoffs, sounding truly jealous now. "Don't waste a gift, Dom."

I stop dead in my tracks. "Whoever said anything about love?"

His eyes roll into the back of his head. "Honestly Dominic, sometimes I think you don't have a brain in your head."

"We only just met." I remind him. "And we've experienced nothing but drama since then, it's not just the pregnancy that can toy with emotions."

"It sounds to me like you'll take any excuse to deny what's staring you in the face. And if you don't wise up and do something about it, other wolves who aren't so hard-headed are going to start horning in on your territory." Roger warns, sounding as if he'd like to lead the charge. "Ella might not be able to serve as a true Luna, but that's only a concern if you have a pack to lead. No one will care if she's human when she can clearly bear shifter children."

“Is that a threat?” I counter, my defenses riled by the obvious longing in his voice.

“I’m not delusional enough to think that Ella could ever forgive me for helping the Prince plan the first attack.” Roger sighs.

“But you can still hope.” I suggest, letting a note of menace bleed into my voice.

“Dominic, I’m done battling with my own family. From the sounds of it, we’re going to need each other in the months ahead... if there’s to be a war – we can’t be divided.” He grimaces, though I note he didn’t really answer my question. After all, it’s one thing to say you won’t pursue someone, and another to say you don’t want to in the first place.

“I’m trying to win so that there won’t be a war.” I grumble. “But I agree, we’ve been enemies for too long. No woman should come between brothers, and unlike Lydia, Ella would never want to.”

“Lydia couldn’t help it.” Roger defends, some of his old animosity rising to the surface. “It was the bond.”

I purse my lips, trying to decide whether or not I want to tell Roger the truth about Lydia. He’s never been willing to listen before, and I know this is an opportunity to clear the air between us. I also know it could backfire catastrophically. “Roger, Lydia used us both.” I declare, deciding that more lies won’t help anything. “I know what she told you, but she knew we were fated for two years before she left you.”

“What?” Roger gapes, the gears visibly turning in his mind as he struggles to process this information. “No, your bond manifested when you turned 18.”

I shake my head, determined to make him hear me out. “It manifested when I was 16, but Dad didn’t name me his heir until I reached adulthood. The only reason she decided to give into fate was because he announced it on my birthday. Before that she made it perfectly clear I wasn’t good enough for her.”

Roger slumps into a chair. “But, you never said...”

“Why would I? She didn’t want me and I wanted you to be happy. I didn’t want to give you another reason to hate me.” I confess.

“So why did you betray me?” He hisses, his wolf glowing in his eyes. “If you really wanted me to be happy you could have rejected her when she changed her mind?”

“I was a pup!” I exclaim. “I’d spent two years in misery, longing for my mate. My wolf was half mad with unrequited feelings and I was too young to know better. I was blinded by our bond, and it wasn’t until years later that I realized what a fool I’d been. I never

wanted to hurt you... I just wasn't strong enough to resist fate. Not then, at least."

Roger sits back, watching me closely. After a few long moments, he scrubs his palm over his face, and I'm shocked to see his eyes are red – on the verge of tears. "I haven't been a very good brother to you, have I?"

"You've been a pain in the ass." I quip, huffing an exasperated laugh. "Roger, when we were little you were my hero. I would have followed you anywhere!"

"But I never let you." He finishes my thought, clamping his eyes shut. "Dad tried to tell me a thousand times that it wasn't your fault Mom died. And I know it wasn't fair of me to treat you so horribly. In hindsight, I don't even think you're the one I hated, I was just so mad at the Goddess for taking her from me, and I needed someone to blame."

"I know." I affirm, remembering our argument after the Wild Hunt. It seems like every other conversation we have these days is some long-overdue emotional blowout. We've poured out years worth of feelings and resentments in a handful of weeks, and already our relationship feels like it's turned a corner. For the first time since I was a child, I feel like my brother is more friend than enemy.

Roger is giving me a watery smile, and I realize he's realizing the same thing I am. "And to think, all it took was one tiny human to finally make us talk all this out."

To my amazement, I'm smiling back. "One tiny, very special human." I correct, thinking of the beautiful creature I left at home.

Roger frowns, "At some point we need to talk about how this all started, Dom. Ella said you still don't know how your sample got switched in the sperm lab."

"That's a conversation for another time." My jaw clenches reflexively. "I haven't told Ella yet, but my investigators have come across evidence which suggests whoever is responsible is very powerful... and they knew exactly what they were doing."

Chapter 85 – Ella Starts to Worry

Sinclair

When I enter the Blood Moon Tavern for the 'have a drink with the Alpha' town hall event, I immediately begin cursing Hugo. My beta may have talked me into this campaign event with good intentions, but I would so much rather go home to Ella. After the way we left things this evening, not to mention my conversation with Roger, my wolf is positively rabid to go climb into bed with her and finish what we started.

However, I made a pledge to my pack that I would come out to this bar and talk with the people one on one, giving them an opportunity to share their thoughts, grievances and questions with me in an informal setting. It's the sort of event the Prince would never consider holding, and also the kind common shifters appreciate most. So I plaster a smile on my face and enter the rustic pub, greeting the assembled pack members as if there's nothing I would rather be doing.

At first I'm completely distracted, preoccupied with thoughts of Ella, our growing pup and whether it might be possible that my brother is right. Could our feelings for each other be more than mere attraction and the connection forged by our pup? Could we be falling in love? I'm not even sure I know what love feels like – of course I imagined myself head over heels for Lydia once, but can there be true love when one partner is only in the relationship for selfish, personal gain? Can a person honestly know what it means to be in love, when it's all one sided?

A burst of laughter and noise pulls my attention away from my thoughts, and suddenly I realize I've been neglecting my conversation with the pack members around me. "I know that look." One of the men in front of me guffaws, slapping his leg. "I'd say the Alpha has his mind on things far lovelier than taxes."

"A certain she-wolf with a swollen belly perhaps?" Another wolf suggests, wagging his eyebrows.

I laugh apologetically, though none of the wolves surrounding me seem upset. They all look as though they understand all too well. "I'm sorry, you've caught me. I have a hard time letting my mate out of my sight these days." I confess, knowing that speaking plainly is far more likely to win me points with this demographic.

"It's no worry." An older man assures me, patting my back. "I remember what it was like when my wife was breeding, and it's always worst with the first."

"When I found out my Mary was pregnant, I actually attacked one of her colleagues when he got too close to her!" Another man shares, "luckily he didn't hold it against me."

I chuckle, "My wolf wanted me to go after Ella's doctor and the nurses when we first got

the news – men and women.” I relate, earning myself a fresh round of laughter. “Luckily she’s learned to climb into my arms anytime I start getting aggressive, the clever minx knows I can’t attack anyone if I’m holding her.”

They raise their brows with approval, not just any she-wolf can take on an Alpha’s riled wolf, even when it’s their mate. I swell with pride over their impressed looks, but settle in to listen rather than continue spending my own voice. I’m amazed that this burly group of hardened shifters is so content to talk about she-wolves and babies rather than politics or security, but before long all the rough and tumble bar patrons are exchanging stories of becoming fathers and the antics of their children. I’m suddenly wishing I’d brought my own father along, and thinking that I wouldn’t mind campaign events so much if they were all like this.

I order a second drink as the tales unfold, but set it down after a few sips. Though I requested the same brand of liquor as my first tumbler-full, there’s a strange metallic taste to the liquid that turns my stomach. I wonder if soap was left in the glass after being washed, or perhaps the bartender opened a new bottle, not realizing the liquor inside had turned. Unfortunately I never figure out what’s wrong with the draught, because the last thing I remember is thinking that it tastes off, and then everything is dark.

Ella

When Sinclair doesn’t come home in time for dinner, I assume the campaign event ran long. I’m disappointed, but I know that these things are often out of his hands. Winning the crown is more important than spending time with me, and only a complete narcissist could be upset by that fact.

Says the woman who wants to curl up in a ball and cry because Sinclair cares more about the campaign than you. The little voice in my head remarks dryly.

That’s not fair. I answer, beyond frustrated. Those are more hormones talking, not logic.

Sure, sure. She snips. Blame the baby.

I pat my tummy. “I don’t blame you.” I tell my growing pup, “I do, however, blame my body.”

The baby flutters and kicks against my hand, as if he’s telling me he understands completely. I feel a rush of love so powerful my dour mood disappears, and I can only smile as I get through my meal, content to talk to the tiny being inside me.

Unfortunately, my good mood only lasts until I realize it's almost nine o'clock, and Sinclair still hasn't come home. I decide to call him, but the line rings and rings before eventually going to voicemail. I hang up and send him a quick text: Just checking in, is the event going alright?

Nothing.

Sighing, I put my phone aside and decide to take a bath. I'm worrying about nothing, the sooner I stop thinking about Sinclair, the sooner he'll be home.

I don't know. My conscience interjects, something feels off to me. Are you sure he's okay.

It was an event at a bar, he probably just got caught up. Or maybe he decided to have a night out – he never gets to do anything for himself. He deserves to let loose a little.

True, but I don't think he'd do that without telling you. The voice replies.

It probably slipped his mind. I insist, shaking off the sting carried by the idea of being an afterthought to him.

I fill the huge whirl pool tub in Sinclairs bathroom, choosing to use his rooms instead of my own, just in case he comes home while I'm soaking. I have a sudden, silly fantasy of him walking in while I'm submerged in the hot water and bubbles. I imagine him claiming that he's dirty after his night out and insisting that he needs to join me. I picture him climbing into the tub with me, and settling me between his legs.

As I sink into the steaming water, I slide my own hands over my soft skin, pretending that they're Sinclairs – knowing he'll probably demand to wash me himself, and getting lost in the sensations. My hand lingers over my breasts and between my legs, Sinclair's deep voice filling my head with flimsy excuses about how he has to make sure all my important parts are clean.

Before long I'm breathing heavily and flushed for reasons that have nothing to do with the heat of the bath, and I decide this has to stop before Sinclair walks in and catches me in a much more intimate act than bathing. I wash quickly, settling down enough to soak, but soon the water grows cold, and I have no choice but to get out.

I check the time as I pull on a plush robe. 11 o'clock now. I retrieve my phone, only to find that I haven't had any calls or texts from Sinclair. Feeling truly worried now, I call him again. I know it's not very late, but he promised to be home hours ago, and I've never known him to run late without communicating the delay. When I get his voicemail I try calling two more times, and send a couple more texts for good measure.

Are you okay? I was expecting you hours ago.

Should I wait up?

Why do I feel so anxious about asking these simple questions? I got past my wariness of scaring Sinclair off ages ago, and yet this still feels like a test, like I might be coming on too strong or seem needy for worrying about him.

That's Mike's influence. The little voice in my head reminds me. He would accuse you of being a nagging shrew if you wanted to know when to expect him home, that's not Sinclair. Don't put that on him.

Then why hasn't he called me? Why isn't he responding?

Something's wrong. My conscience insists, more forcefully now.

I decide to call Roger, just to make sure Sinclair actually made it to the campaign event after their talk. He answers quickly, but confirms Sinclair left hours ago. He tells me to sit tight while he goes to the bar, and so I hang up and try to be patient.

In the end, I don't have to wait for Roger to call me back. My phone chirps, and I see a message from Sinclair.

Stop bothering me – I found better company for the night.

Then, immediately following the text, a photo appears. Sinclair is naked in a strange bed, his eyelids heavy over a sultry stare, his clothes from this evening slung over a nightstand. And there beside him, naked as the day she was born – is Lydia.

Chapter 86 – Sinclair Wakes with His Ex

Sinclair

The world is fuzzy when I wake. I sit up, instantly on edge. My wolf knows something is wrong, not that this is any great feat of instinct. I don't recognize my surroundings, and I have no recollection of falling asleep. The last thing I remember is being at the 'have a drink with the Alpha' event and talking about fatherhood with my constituents.

How much time has passed? I wonder, my thoughts trapped in a strange fog. I feel hungover, but I can't imagine I had enough alcohol to render me in such a state. It's already light out, and why do I smell...

"Lydia!" I exclaim, scanning the space for my ex-wife. The entire room reeks of her, and belatedly I realize we're in a hotel. I can sense her presence in the other room, but as I slide from bed I realize I'm completely naked.

She appears in the doorway of the bathroom, leaning against the frame. She's wearing my dress shirt from last night. It's unbuttoned from collar to hem, making it clear that she's nude underneath. I'm sure she intended it to give me tantalizing flashes of her tan skin, but I feel no attraction for her at all. My wolf is roaring in my head, my hackles raising defensively when Lydia flashes her fangs in a lethal grin. "Good morning, lover."

"What have you done?" I snarl, not bothering to hide my outrage and disgust. Slowly, so slowly I feel furious with my own dull wits, a picture is forming in my mind. The puzzle pieces are slowly clicking into place. I feel so groggy, achy and nauseous, not because I'm hungover, but because I was drugged.

That metallic taste in my drink. I realize angrily, wishing I'd had the sense to walk out of the pub the moment I realized something was off. I glance again to the windows, realizing it must be morning already. I have no memory of last night and no way of knowing what I did in my drugged state. Did she give me something that unhinged me enough that I would actually sleep with her? Did I make a scene when I left the bar?

"Dominic, I haven't done anything!" Lydia exclaims, looking offended. "Don't you remember? We ran into each other after your event last night. I guess without your little pet hanging on your arm you were finally able to remember why we're so good together."

Ella! I think suddenly. I promised her I'd be home in time for dinner, she must be so worried! "Where's my phone?" I demand sharply.

Lydia's mouth drops open, and some of her haughtiness sleeps away. "Seriously?!" She bursts out, "that's all it takes, one mention of the little bitch and you just forget I exist?"

Without thinking, I lunge for Lydia, my claws and fangs extended, my shoulders shaking

with the effort of holding off the urge to shift. I stop myself short of reaching for her, though my wolf is sorely tempted. "Don't you ever talk about Ella that way. In fact, keep her name and any other foul nicknames you come up with, out of your mouth completely."

"What are you doing?" Lydia sputters, flinching and backing away from me. "I'm your mate. You can't.... This isn't..."

"You think I can't threaten you? You think I can't hurt you if you endanger my family?" I snap. "You aren't my mate anymore, Lydia, and you weren't ever worthy of being Luna even when you had the title." Despite my words, even I'm shocked at how easy I find it to show aggression to her. Everything I know about fated mates has taught me that I shouldn't be able to stomach raising a hand against her, but it's almost as if she and Ella have traded places in my heart. Now my wolf only cares for protecting the mother of our pup, even if it means protecting her from my once-fated mate.

"I haven't done a thing to your disgusting little family." Lydia spits, hissing like a cat.

"You drugged me." I accuse. "What if I let something sensitive slip under the influence? How did you get me out of that bar?"

What if someone saw us leaving together? You might have compromised my campaign!" I thunder, "and that does threaten my family – make no mistake."

"Who are you!" Lydia explodes, furious and cowering at once. "People don't just stop being mates, Dominic! You can't just erase our past because you found a new plaything. You always said I was more important to you than politics... and now it's like..."

Goddess, I don't even recognize you!

"You didn't really think that you could just walk out on me and I'd stay the same, did you? Did you expect me to wallow like a heartsick pup when I have a pack to lead and the fate of the entire fucking realm is on my shoulders? Did you really believe I'd stay here pining for you, and you would be able to walk back into my life like nothing happened?" I rumble coldly, wondering how I ever imagined myself in love with this woman. Ella would never ask me to choose her over the campaign, she wouldn't want me to. "And for the record, Lydia. I said you were more important than politics, not the pack – not my duty to protect my people."

"Well you didn't care very much about your family or your pack last night." Lydia announces spitefully, wearing a cruel smile that looks more like a grimace. "The time apart certainly didn't cost us in the bedroom. You were every bit as ferocious and virile as ever. I might be pregnant already."

I try not to let her see how deeply her words cut me. The idea that I had sex with her under the influence of her drugs makes me sick to my stomach. I have no way of knowing if she's telling the truth. There aren't any marks on her body from hickeys or lovebites, and I don't feel any scratches on my back of physical signs of the kind of rambunctious lovemaking we used to have, but then again – if I was most unconscious then there wouldn't be any of those signs. So while I'm sure her remarks about my ferocity are a lie, I can't rule out sex entirely. The bed is in complete disarray, and she certainly smells like me. Is it just from sleeping together... or did she manage to steal my seed the way she's suggesting.

"What would it matter if you're pregnant?" I say instead. "I already have my heir."

"You know better than anyone that the first born child isn't always the strongest." Lydia answers shrewdly, looking so cunning I wonder how Roger and I were ever fooled by her. "And your current heir hasn't even been born yet. It wouldn't be a bad thing to have a spare. Goddess knows anything can happen between now and the birth." She doesn't say the words as a threat, but it's hard not to hear them that way with all the attempts on Ella's life. However Lydia isn't paying attention to the dangerous line she's walking, she presses on, rubbing her belly as if it's confirmed that she's breeding. "I guarantee any child of mine will be stronger than that pipsqueak's. Soon you won't have any need of Ella at all."

The petty part of me wants to lash out and tell Lydia that if it were possible for us to make a baby together it would have happened in the years we were married. I want to tell her she's delusional if she thinks she can get pregnant at all. But damn it if Ella's silky voice isn't interrupting my thoughts, encouraging me to show compassion even though this monster doesn't deserve any.

Just then I see my phone, balanced on the edge of the nightstand. I snatch it up and turn on the screen, immediately going to my messages. I'm not surprised to see multiple missed calls and texts from Ella, but I'm horrified when I see the response I sent her, and the photo. "You sent this to her?" I roar, thrusting the device towards Lydia's sneering face.

She smirks, "Of course not, that was all you."

I stalk forward, closing the final distance between us. "You better hope you are pregnant, Lydia." I declare icily, "because if you aren't, I swear to the Goddess I will hunt you down and make sure you can't ever come anywhere near me, or my family again."

I storm out without another word. I dial Ella as I race across town, unsurprised when she doesn't answer the phone. My wolf is already in a panic about her reaction to Lydia's taunting message. I don't care how drunk or disoriented I was, I know I wouldn't have ignored Ella that way – not when she's all my wolf wants. Was she very upset? Did it

exacerbate her stress to a dangerous level? I only stop for the barest second at a newsstand to make sure there's nothing in the papers about Lydia and I, before continuing to my mansion.

But when I arrive, Ella is nowhere to be found.

Chapter 87 – Ella Runs Away

Ella

“Goddess, Cora, what’s wrong with me?” I moan, burying my head in my hands. “I’ve been thinking Sinclair is too good to be true all along. There cannot be a bigger red flag and I just ignored it. I let him love bomb me and I bought every manipulative word out of his mouth.” I’m seated in my sister’s living room, rocking back and forth in my seat while she looks on anxiously. After I received Sinclair’s text last night, I didn’t waste any time getting out of his house. I went out onto my balcony and waited until the patrolling guards passed by, then climbed down the trellis and out the back gate. There was a vicious thunderstorm roiling at the time, but I barely noticed. I ran through the pouring rain, not stopping until I reached Cora’s apartment.

In hindsight I’m sure I scared her half to death – turning up on her doorstep in the middle of the night, looking like a drowned rat. Nonetheless, she immediately ushered me in and got me a change of dry clothes and a cup of hot tea, but I wasn’t calm enough to actually explain what happened until this morning.

“Ella just slow down, I didn’t think anything had even happened between you two?” Cora asks, watching me with obvious concern.

“I mean, nothing huge.” I clarify. “We’ve flirted and kissed and fooled around a bit... and I’ve insisted that things not go any further. At least, I had enough sense to ensure we didn’t start an actual relationship.”

“And he agreed? You said no and he didn’t push you?” Cora presses.

“Yeah, I mean it’s been hard because we’re attracted to each other, but he’s been trying to respect my wishes.”

“Then how can he have love bombed you?” She inquires, looking confused.

*[I guess that’s the wrong expression.” I concede. “It’s just, you should hear the way he talks to me, and the way he behaves. He’s so affectionate and warm that I got completely lulled into complacency. He just lavishes attention and compliments, and he actually listens and takes criticism. He takes my thoughts and opinions into account, and he has this silly side where he can be so fun and playful, but at the same time he doesn’t let me get away with murder. He calls me on my shit and holds me accountable. Like I said, he’s just too good to be true.”

Cora is frowning deeply, keeping her expression guarded while she processes my words. “Ella

“What? Why are you looking at me that way?” I burst, instantly regretting my sharp tone.

I'm sorry, I shouldn't have snapped at you..." Suddenly I want to cry. "I didn't mean it. I'm just really out of sorts."

"I know, honey." She murmurs, her brows furrowing in sympathy. "And don't take this the wrong way, but none of that sounds very bad. I mean, it's not like he's pretending to be this perfect person. You two started off on terrible footing. Terrible." She repeats for emphasis. He thought you were a gold digger and was going to separate you from your child. You had to learn to get along, and sure that happened fast once you decided to trust each other, but... I'm sorry Ella, but it honestly just sounds like you like each other." She leans forward, resting her

elbows on her knees and sending me serious therapist vibes. "Is it possible that you are so used to assholes like Mike, that you assume being treated well is evidence of some sort of trick?"

It takes me a moment to absorb that. Is she right? Am I so unused to receiving genuine affection and compliments that I somehow mistook them for Sinclair grooming me for abuse? Even as I think this, I recall the other things that have happened between us. "That's not all." I confess, blushing scarlet. "Yes he's affectionate and that feels strange to me, but he's also bossy and domineering. He always expects to be in charge."

"Of course he is, he's an Alpha." Cora remarks blithely.

"But, I mean, in charge in... well, I mean..."

Cora rolls her eyes. "Ella, stop beating around the bush, just tell me what happened."

"It's just that he doesn't stop at giving orders, he holds me to them." I confess. "Once, even spanked me."

"Okay." Cora responds, looking as though she's waiting for me to say more.

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"After the attack on the wild hunt." I explain, offering the information freely now. "I mean... I slapped him first and he said all this crap about catharsis, but I didn't even question it because he said it was normal with shifter couples."

"You slapped Dominic Sinclair?" Cora gapes.

"He was annoying me!" I defend hotly. "He kept saying I should stay home and rest but I wasn't about to let that foul prince win."

"So let me get this straight..." Cora begins, clearly struggling to wrap her mind about

this. You were in shock, being obstinate and refusing to take care of yourself, then you attacked him and he responded the way that any wolf would?”

“Basically.” I grimace, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Did he injure you?” She inquires, “Traumatize you?”

“No.” I’m blushing again. “It hurt, but it brought me out of my shock and it really did help me to cry... plus, well I was really turned on afterward.” I whisper, unable to believe I’m actually sharing this part.

Cora chuckles. “So what’s the problem?”

“You don’t find that strange!?” I exclaim.

“Ella, I’ve been around shifters a lot longer than you have.” Cora explains, sighing as though she’s not sure how to make me understand. “Power dynamics are a big part of their culture and from a scientific perspective it makes perfect sense. Dominance means strength and strength means survival. And if you liked it, who cares whether or not other people think it’s strange. You’d hardly be the only human who’s ever wanted that from a partner.

“I didn’t say I liked it.” I object. “Just that it helped me...and turned me on... and I did like feeling how in control he was when I was beside myself.”

“Do you want him to do it again?” She asks, grinning mischievously now.

I throw a pillow at her, laughing with faux outrage. I’m only just coming to terms with the fact that I do want to be with Sinclair that way again, when I remember why I’m here unloading all

this on my sister in the first place. My mood dampens almost immediately. “What I want doesn’t matter.”

Cora purses her lips, “Okay, so you haven’t been love bombed, and he hasn’t been mistreating you, and you don’t want a relationship, right?”

‘Right.’ I confirm, thankful that we worked through all this, but suddenly anticipating Cora’s next question.

“Then Ella, why are you so upset about Lydia?” She asks. “You told him point blank that you don’t want to be with him and you agreed to step aside if he finds a new mate from the beginning. I know you weren’t expecting it to be Lydia, but... so what if it is?”

“Because it means he lied to me.” I explain miserably. “It means he’s been lying to me about her for months, and that Roger was right about him running back to her at the first opportunity.”

“Are you sure they were lies?” Cora counters. “Do you think it’s possible he believed what he was telling you at the time, and then changed his mind? We all have blind spots when it comes to our exes. He wouldn’t be the first person to convince himself he hated his former partner to try and protect himself from getting hurt again.”

I shrug, suddenly doubting myself. “I don’t know. He certainly seemed to mean what he was saying at the time, but he’s also a politician, he’s bound to be a good liar.” 1

“He’s an Alpha, not a politician. And he also has the campaign to think about, he might have been resisting her for his sake and the pack’s at once.” Cora suggests.

“Maybe,” I acknowledge, hating how logical this sounds. The longer we talk I’m slowly losing my justifications for being so upset, but I still feel as if my world has come crashing down around me.

“Ella?” Cora calls my attention to her lovely face. Immediately I know she’s coming to the same conclusion I am. “You snuck out of the house and ran through the night, in a thunderstorm, when people have been trying to kill you. You’ve exhausted all the possible reasons to justify this except one, and a few lies on his part hardly seem enough to warrant how devastated you are.”

“What’s your point?” I remark sullenly, already knowing where this is going.

“Are you sure you don’t like him?” Cora asks bluntly. “Not just you’re attracted to him or like the affection, but that you have genuine feelings for him and you’re upset because you think he might not return your feelings now that he’s back with Lydia?”

Her words slam into me one after the other, but before I can give them the consideration they deserve, there’s a sudden pounding at the door.

Chapter 88 – Sinclair takes Ella home

Ella

It was easy to be reasonable when it was just me and Cora. When my sister's low, steady voice was talking me through all my misguided rationalizations, I didn't struggle to stay calm, I didn't have to fight a tidal wave of raging emotions too tangled and convoluted to ever sort out. I was able to listen and really interrogate my assumptions, to use logic and reason without getting caught up in my emotions. However as soon as Sinclair appears, all that goes out the window.

Just seeing his handsome face makes me want to burst into tears, and I'm so miserable and furious that I don't know what to do. A sense of utter betrayal slams into me, and for the first time I understand why I was so afraid of being love bombed. He might not have been

manipulating me, but I think I've been falling in love with Sinclair all along – no matter how hard I tried to fight it.

Sinclair's power washes over me the moment he enters the room. He barely pauses to greet Cora, his attention clearly elsewhere as his sharp eyes scan the room, only stopping once they land on me. He immediately crosses to the couch where I'm seated and kneels down in front of me. "Ella," my name is a sigh of relief, and he unwinds my arms from my body so he can look me over, as if he's worried I've somehow been injured in his absence. I try to resist his strength, but he makes a deep rumbling sound and I instinctively surrender. His hungry gaze rakes over every inch of my skin before finally rising to meet my eyes. He takes my face in his hands. "Are you alright?"

Knowing I'm playing with fire and not giving a damn, I shoot him a sulky glare. "What do you care?" I hate myself as soon as the words leave my lips. I sound like such a child.

His brows knit, "That's a no." He assesses gruffly, pursing his lips as if he's internal cursing himself. "I'm so sorry about last night. I can explain-

"I'm fine." I counter sharply, not wanting him to see how badly I'm hurt. "I don't give a damn what you do or who you see when we're not together."

Sinclair arches one dark brow, leveling me with an expression so stern I want to crawl under the couch and hide. "In that case we can go home and discuss the way you snuck out last night, without

your guards, without letting anyone know where you were going." His powerful hand slides around to my nape, and something deep and primal in my bones curls in on itself. "Not to mention crawling down trellises in the rain, especially when you're carrying precious cargo."

"I don't want to go anywhere with you." I snap, hating to be reminded of how reckless I was with

my

unborn child. "I came to Cora's because I wanted to be with my sister and I'm going to stay here."

"Then

you have a choice." Sinclair informs me, his voice like gravel. "Because I'm not leaving you when you're like this. So we can have this out here, in front of Cora, or we can go home and do it in private."

I glance over his shoulder at Cora, who's currently staring at me as if she's never seen me before. I know I'm behaving like a complete brat, but I can't help myself. Sinclair turns me into someone I don't recognize in times like these, and though part of me thinks it must be

the baby's influence, I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel right. Pushing back against Sinclair seems like the natural thing to do, something the voice in my head is demanding despite my better judgment.

"You need to leave." I growl, a pitiful rumble sounding in my chest.

Sinclair's eyes flash dangerously, and he flashes his fangs, showing me his inner wolf. "Have it your way." The next thing I know his shoulder is digging into my pelvis, and I'm being tipped upside. Before I know it I'm slung over his shoulder like a sack of flour. I yelp in surprise, feeling the blood rush to my head. Before I can hope to orient myself, my hair spills down towards the ground, completely blocking my vision of everything beyond Sinclair's muscular back. 1

"Dominic! The baby!" 1 object, squirming vigorously.

"The baby is perfectly fine." Sinclair promises, locking his arm over the back of my knees to cease my escape attempts. "You, on the other hand..."

"Put me down right now!" I order, kicking my feet into his toned abs and remembering that his body is constructed of pure steel. The pain in my toes only enrages me more, and so I start beating my clenched fists against his firm backside. "This isn't fair, you tyrant!" I snarl, fighting for all I'm worth.

"That's right, you just get it all out of your system, baby." Sinclair chuckles, patting my

thighs. "But you better believe I'm taking note."

He carries me out the door and into the elevator, letting me vent my rage with so little reaction I wonder if he even notices my attack. "Can you even feel this, you ogre!" I exclaim. "Like ferocious little mosquito bites, sweetheart." Sinclair taunts, earning himself another outraged snarl. Of course, the big wolf only laughs. He carts me out of the building and onto the street, where anyone can see us.

"Dominic, people will see!" I object, stilling my movements for the first time.

"Then you might want to stop making all those adorable little growling sounds. People are going to start searching if they think there's an angry kitten on the loose." Sinclair informs me sagely.

"This isn't funny!" I cry, hating him for making light of my misery. Sinclair deposits me into the back of his limo, and I immediately slide over the seats and try to climb out the other side. Unfortunately Sinclair's shifter speed gets the better of me again, and I'm dragged back into the car. Furious, I move into the seat across from him, biting down on my lower lip to stop it. from quivering and betraying how close to tears I am.

"I don't think this is funny, Ella." Sinclair answers, sounding so sober I wonder if this is the same man who was teasing me a moment ago. "This is very serious to me, but I can't help the way your defiance provokes my wolf any more than you can help feeling provoked by me." His glowing, emerald eyes are boring into me, piercing straight through me with so much intensity I can't doubt his honesty. "And I admit, I find you too cute to bear when you get riled up this way... but I don't find anything about the situation we're in amusing

I cross my arms over my chest, and suddenly I taste blood I guess I was biting myself too hard, and now of course Sinclair is beside me, tsking and tugging my crimson stained lip from the prison of my teeth I pull away from him, not wanting to be soothed and coddled when I'm still so furious. Sinclair's jaw clenches, but he lets me go "Ella, If you stopped

fighting me for a minute I could tell you what happened."

"You might be able to bully me physically, but you can't make me listen to you." I snipe. Whatever it is you want to say – I don't want to hear it."

More like you're afraid to hear what he needs to tell you. The little voice in my head observes.

So what if I am? I counter. It's not like it will change anything. The writing is already on the wall. I don't need him to tell me how he thought he was over Lydia and didn't realize

he wasn't until it was too late. I don't want to listen to his apologies or promises he can't keep, about how this doesn't have to change our plan.

Maybe not, but you could at least try to be less petty about it.

She has a point. I don't know why I get this way with him, I never suffered from immaturity before meeting Sinclair.

You never had the option before. My conscience reminds me. You always had to be the up in every situation you were in.

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Then I should be able to act like one now. I think miserably, even though I know it's a losing battle. I'm about to be a mother. I can't regress just because I got my feelings hurt.

Sinclair is still watching me, and I fight the instinct to squirm under his scrutiny. I take a few deep breaths, trying to work myself up to an apology for my behavior, but unsure how I can word it without also opening us up to a discussion. Before I can come up with the right answer, Sinclair's familiar bass breaks through my thoughts. "What upsets you more Ella, the way I handled last night, or the fact that it happened in the first place?"

"What?" I reply, feeling my hackles raise defensively. Surely he's not suggesting what I think he is. 1

A moment later however, my pulse begins to race as Sinclair repeats his question, this time cutting right to the heart of the matter. "I'm asking: are you angry, or are you jealous?"

Chapter 89 – Jealousy

Sinclair

“I’m not jealous!” Ella explodes, almost as soon as the question left my mouth. Her heart is pounding in her chest, so fast and loud that I wouldn’t be able to tune it out if I tried. Her cheeks are consumed by a crimson blush, and my wolf is already celebrating in my head. She’s jealous! She has feelings! She knows she’s mine! Mine, mine, mine!

He has a point. Ella is not a good liar, and though she may be able to disguise her feelings under usual circumstances, her emotions are much too turbulent to allow that now. She sounded about as believable as a fox caught breaking into a henhouse, insisting it only wanted to look at the tasty morsels inside.

I arch my brow skeptically and, seeming to realize how defensive she just sounded, Ella takes a deep breath and tries again. “I’m not jealous.” She repeats, and though she does sound more convincing now, her body is still betraying her. Her color is still so high, and her heart is still racing. “I’m angry because you lied to me.”

I know I should correct her right here and now, explain exactly what happened last night whether she wants to hear it or not. But my inner hunter knows I’m onto something, and there’s no turning off my prey drive. “Then you don’t care whether I sleep with other she-wolves, as long as I’m honest about it?”

Her plump, pink lip – still stained with blood – trembles dangerously, and her voice sounds suddenly tight. “That’s right.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire! My wolf chants, running triumphant laps through my consciousness. He’s zooming around like a puppy, though I can’t let Ella see how excited I am. As thrilling as this revelation is, she is lying to me. I might be able to forgive that since I know she’s trying to protect her tender heart, but forgiveness doesn’t mean acceptance. “Are you being honest with me, little human?” I rumble, pinning her with a stern glower.

Ella’s luminous gold eyes widen and her lips part on a startled gasp. I can see her preparing to answer me, to tell me another falsehood, but before she can say yes, she seems to realize how hypocritical the question is. “Why should I have to be honest when you aren’t!?” She demands fiercely.

“Ella “I growl, a clear warning.

“No! You’ve kept things from me over and over again in the name of protecting me, and you went back to your ex after promising that there was nothing between you.” She accuses. “Last night probably wasn’t even the first time! How long have you been sneaking around with her, Dominic? Has everything that’s happened since I got

pregnant been some scheme you two orchestrated to get an heir and win the campaign? Did you arrange the switch at the sperm bank to send all this into motion? What are you planning once the baby comes? Are you just going to steal my child and kick me to the curb?"

I reel back, shocked by the depth of her mistrust. My wolf's jubilation over her jealousy disappears immediately. He whimpers pitifully, devastated to see her so miserable – so undone by fear and betrayal. No, this isn't right! Fix it!

She can't honestly believe any of those things are true, can she? Are these tears that have been

building up in her all along? Or is she simply spiraling because of the perceived lie? She's had trust issues from the day we met, and it pains me to think she might have been tormented by such paranoia, but I could also understand how her baggage might turn one trigger into this maelstrom. I want to tell Ella these ideas are absurd, I want to insist that she'd have to be mad to believe these things, but I know that won't help anything.

"Ella." I say firmly, "Look at me."

"I don't want to." She snaps, stubbornly turning her head away from me.

"I'm not asking." I clarify severely, waiting for the power in my voice to do its work. Slowly she obeys, turning her head back and lifting her blazing, terrified eyes to mine. I press my hand to her belly, letting her feel the solid weight, praying my warmth will bleed through her skin and into her bones. "I didn't lie to you, Ella." I state evenly, "I know you don't want to talk about it, but "

To my amazement, flames blaze to life behind Ella's eyes, and she slams her hands over her ears, glaring at me with so much hurt and animosity that the gesture no longer seems childish. A world of pain and betrayal swirls in her brilliant irises, and I remember that she's not only a woman who's been deeply scarred by her past, but also one who is battling a thousand raging hormones. Exhaling heavily, I remove my palm from her tummy in order to pull her hands away from her ears. As soon as I do, her eyes fill with tears, and I realize how afraid she is of having her fears confirmed.

"I didn't lie to you." I repeat, deciding that this will have to do for now. "When you're ready to listen to me, I'll explain everything, but right now I need you to know that everything that has happened since we met has been completely real. I didn't have anything to do with the switch at the sperm bank, and I was just as shocked by it as you were. Sweetheart, you remember how angry and unreasonable I was at the time." I remind her, biting back a smile. "I couldn't fake that if I tried, nor is it how any sane human would act if they wanted to draw someone into a trap." I forge on. "I am not,

under any circumstances, going to keep Rafe from you. He came from each of us, and he belongs with each of us. I know I hid some things from you, but I haven't ever deceived you about my feelings, and I haven't been sneaking around with Lydia or anyone else."

Little by little, my words sink in. I can see the change in Ella's posture as she slowly deflates, unwinding the tension from her muscles with every sentence I complete. Of course, the more she unwinds, the closer she comes to falling apart. Soon her tears are falling freely, and she looks utterly ashamed of herself. "I'm sorry, I know I'm being crazy." She hiccups. "I don't even know why I said those things. I think I'm losing it."

"Jealousy can do that to a person." I tease gently, reflexively pulling her closer, trying to draw her into my lap.

Ella's little body goes stiff with outrage, and she pushes my hands away. "I'm not jealous!" She repeats, though her exclamation sounds more like a whimper now.

"Tsk, of course not." I sympathize, overwhelming her struggles and scooping her up. She doesn't come easily, but I gradually trap her defiant limbs until she's completely bound in my arms. I purr softly, and though I know she doesn't want to submit, soon I feel her tearstained face pressing into the curve of my neck, and her pert nose breathing in my scent. "Though it's too bad."

"Why?" Ella demands grumpily, sniffing as she snuggles closer. Petulant as she's feeling, she

leans into my touch as I pet her disgruntled form and nuzzle her hair. Her delicious aroma fills my senses, and I feel like I can breathe for first time all morning. Goddess I needed this. When I realized she was missing this morning, I'd panicked completely. Not only because I feared for her safety, hating the idea of her being unprotected in a city full of wolves, but also because I was afraid that Lydia had broken something in our relationship for good.

When I found Ella at her sister's, furious and lashing out at me like a hellcat, I realized there was still hope. She wouldn't be so upset if she didn't care, but I also hated seeing her so unhappy. My wolf wouldn't be calmed until she was safe in my arms again, not attacking me anymore, but seeking my comfort. Yes, this is the way it's meant to be.

"Because of what it would mean if you were jealous." I murmur, finally answering her.

"That I'm a fool." She suggests bitterly, making me shake my head in exasperation.

"That you have feelings for me." I correct, letting some of my own feelings seep into my tone. My hope and desire, the passion that takes all my effort to contain whenever we're

together.

“Oh I’m sure you’d love that.” She mutters mutinously. “The big bad Alpha needs all the women to fall at his feet whether he wants them or not. How amusing for the hopeless little human to ”

Before she can continue, I shut her up – claiming her mouth with my own and stealing her ability to speak another word.

Chapter 90 – Feelings

Sinclair

Ella is as stiff as a board in my arms, frozen in shock to find my lips suddenly on hers, cutting off her bitter tirade. Of course, that only lasts a moment. As soon as the stubborn creature realizes what I'm about, she begins pushing at my shoulders, becoming increasingly agitated when they won't budge. She squirms and struggles, clearly outraged that I kissed her when she was trying to be angry with me. I can practically hear her objections in my mind you're not playing fair! She would say, shooting daggers with her eyes.

Damn straight I would answer, my thoughts conjuring the conversation our bodies are already having.

I rumble softly, and Ella whines – it's a sweet, plaintive sound as her body tries to resist the pull of desire, but I ruthlessly gobble it up. I show her no mercy, caressing her lithe body and devouring her soft murmurs of protest until she melts against me, slanting her mouth beneath mine in total surrender. She whimpers when she finally gives in, as if she doesn't know why she even bothered trying to fight this.

I can taste Ella's blood from the cut on her lip, and my inner wolf groans with pleasure. Unlike our horror film counterparts the vampire, shifters don't have any interest in consuming blood. But it's inevitable to taste the blood of one's mate when delivering a claiming mark, and the flavor has an undeniably Pavlovian effect. I may not want the crimson liquid for nourishment, but I certainly crave the taste of Ella's. It's rich and sweet, and instantly has me thinking about how other parts of her must taste.

Ella's salty tears drip onto my questing lips, but though she cries, she also clings to me with all her might. Her arms have locked around my neck, and she's pressing her soft curves against me with an urgency I understand all too well. My tongue slips past her lips as I rearrange her in my arms, guiding her to straddle my lap so that I can feel her plump breasts and beaded nipples against my chest. So that I can slide my hands down to the curve of her bottom and press my hardness into her soft center, to help her move against me and find pleasure – even through the fabric of our clothes.

Ella responds to me so naturally, so passionately. I barely need to apply any pressure to affect her movement. It's as if she's reading my mind, our bodies speaking the same love language, completely in tune with one another. Her fingers slide into my hair, closing around the dark locks as if she's afraid she needs to hold me in place, lest I take my mouth away. I hold her more tightly, letting her feel my strength and purring when a little thump against my abdomen tells me that the baby is awake and thriving.

I could kiss her for a thousand years and never get bored, I realize. Never get tired of her taste, or grow immune to the feel of her beautiful body in my arms. Never want for

another.

She's perfect. My wolf agrees. We have to claim her. She's strong enough to handle it.

I won't hurt her. I insist. I'm painfully aware of how delicate she is, how fragile her human form is next to my own. It's enough to make me stop handling her so roughly, suddenly afraid I might break her. Ella growls in protest, that same indignant sound that never ceases to fill my heart with warmth.

You see. My wolf argues. She can take it she needs this too.

I purr in apology, sliding my hand in her long, silky hair and clenching it into a fist, holding her head steady as I continue ravishing her. I steal kiss after kiss from her sweet lips, until they're swollen and red for reasons that have nothing to do with her self-inflicted bite. Our breathing is ragged, and Ella's heart is beating so loudly that I don't have to wonder if it's racing as fast as my own – it is.

The scent of her arousal is impossible to ignore in the small space, and the sensation of her grinding against my arousal is enough to make me fear I might come in my slacks like an inexperienced schoolboy. I groan, dragging my mouth from hers to try and catch my breath. Instead I kiss my way over her jaw and nibble one delectable earlobe, eliciting a sultry moan that makes the hard member between my legs leap with excitement.

Down boy, I think in exasperation. Our first time with Ella is not going to be frantic and rushed in the back of a limo.

Ella pulls away from me then, and I realize she must have been startled by the movement – enough to break out of the haze of lust. Her eyes are red-rimmed and her pupils so dilated that her gold irises are a slender ring around the great black pools. Her skin is flushed bright pink, and her hair disheveled. It's a nearly irresistible sight, one that makes me want to go back on my earlier decision not to claim her. No other man should ever be allowed to see my Ella in this state.

"Dominic, this isn't right." She announces, still trying to catch her breath.

"It feels right to me." I reply, resisting the urge to look down at her heaving bosom to see if her breasts are as flushed as the rest of her. Instead I pin her with my dark gaze, massaging her nape and willing her to come back into my embrace.

"That's not the point." Ella insists, sounding as though she might be on the verge of tears again. "Stop looking at me that way!"

"What way?" I clarify, furrowing my brow with concern. "What is the point?"

“Like I’m a rabbit your wolf wants to eat for dinner.” She exclaims. “And the point is that I’m done letting you jerk me around and toy with my feelings!”

“What feelings?” I question, ignoring the first part of her statement. She’s not wrong – my wolf would undoubtedly like to feast on her, just not in the way she means. Again I know I should clear the air between us, but I’m afraid if I do she won’t confess her true emotions. This misunderstanding has provided me with leverage too valuable to ignore, and I might be an asshole for using it against her, but it’s more important to get to the bottom of this. I’ve suspected that Ella has been holding herself back from me for reasons other than disinterest for some time now, and I’m done letting her get away with it. “I thought you didn’t want to be with me?”

“Dominic, why are you so determined to ask me questions when the answers aren’t important?” She hisses angrily. “You’ve made your choice, that’s all that matters.”

“Just tell me, Ella.” I command, sending some of my Alpha authority into my voice. She might not be a wolf, but her instincts are plenty strong. It might be the baby, or she might just be one of those humans who’s more in touch with their primal selves either way she responds to my dominance as naturally as she breathes air.

Ella shivers as my power washes over her, and I’m amazed to see her fight it. “No!” She bursts out, furious even as she tucks a proverbial tail between her legs. “I don’t have to! You might

run the world but you can’t make me open my heart to you. You can’t demand I make myself vulnerable with you that’s my decision.”

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My wolf wants to growl at her defiance, but I can hear the hurt and fear in her voice. Damn it. I realize. She’s right, I’m being an ass. I want the truth, but I don’t want to hurt her to get it. As I ponder my mistake, the car comes to a stop in front of my mansion, sliding into a parking space on the opposite side of the street from the house.

Before I can apologize for letting this misunderstanding persist to serve my own selfish desires, my driver opens the door to allow us out of the car. Ella promptly slides out, and my chauffeur tactfully averts his gaze from her disheveled state. She stomps onto the paved sidewalk, wrapping her arms protectively around herself as she looks from right to left, checking the road is clear before preparing to cross.

I follow suit, exiting the vehicle and going after her. “Ella, I’m sorry.” I pronounce earnestly.

She pauses, turning back in the middle of the empty street. "Don't be haven't done anything wrong."

you were right, you

The screech of tires fills the air as a car suddenly emerges from a parking spot a few spaces down from our own. To my horror and disbelief, it accelerates as fast as it can, heading straight towards Ella.

Chapter 91 – Near Miss

Ella

I'm so focused on Sinclair, I don't even see the car until it's almost upon me. I'm too stunned to move, not that there's time to get out of the way. The only thing I can do is try to turn my body away from the vehicle, to shield my unborn child from the inevitable crash.

Time itself seems to slow down, and there's a dull roaring in my ears. My thoughts fly by, and I'm amazed at the logical clarity I'm able to find in a single, split second. I tell myself to go limp, the impact won't be as terrible if my body isn't tense with fear. Isn't that why drunk people often survive car accidents that would be fatal otherwise?

Unfortunately I don't have time to unwind my tight muscles, as soon as I've had the thought a huge weight collides with my back, slamming into me with so much force the breath is knocked from my lungs. I'm spinning, twisting as the wall of iron surrounds me, forcing my feet off the ground. A deafening crash fills the air, though it seems delayed. Haven't I already been hit?

Then I'm being thrust forward, or is it backwards? I'm moving, flying through the air and yet my limbs are completely constrained. My eyes are clenched shut, and the sound of wrenching metal and shattering glass explodes around me. It's all so sudden, I don't have time to be afraid, to say prayers for my baby, if not for myself.

I wait for the pain, but it doesn't come. After a few moments of holding my breath I realize I'm not moving anymore. Am I dead? Was it so sudden that I didn't feel it?

I peek open one eye, and sunlight blinds me. Is there a sun in the afterlife? I know shifters have a version of heaven, but I didn't imagine humans got to go there..

There's a click, like a car door opening, and then the sound of racing footsteps. "Catch them!" Sinclair's deep voice snarls, so loud that I think he must be yelling in my ear.

Hope courses through my veins. If he's here then I must not be dead. And why am I so warm? I wonder belatedly, imagining myself sprawled over the hood of a vehicle, in too much shock to feel the impact on my broken body. Shouldn't a car that's been sitting in the snow be cold?

"Ella – Ella, are you alright?" Sinclair is talking again, and I open my other eye, anxious to see him. Instead I see the empty street in front of me. "Please say something." He begs, his gentle hands moving over my body from behind. "Are you hurt? Talk to me baby."

Behind me. I think dazedly. But that means... I sit up, truly looking around for the first

time. We're sitting on the hood of the car – at least what used to be the hood. Sinclair's huge body has completely totaled the vehicle. Slowly – infuriatingly slowly, my brain pieces together what must have happened. Sinclair had been fast enough to reach me, but he hadn't had time to push me out of the way.

Instead he'd turned me away from the car and wrapped his own body around me, shielding me from the impact of the car. He'd taken the full force of the crash, and his back had crumpled the bumper and hood beyond recognition, shattering the windshield into a thousand pieces.

I feel nauseous at once, and my body is shaking with fear and adrenaline. "I... I ." I clamber off the crumpled metal surface, my knees giving out as soon as my feet hit the ground. I vomit into the pristine white snow, feeling Sinclair follow me at a pace much too slow for his supernatural strength. I'm afraid to: look at him, but he's hovering beside me, surreptitiously running his hands over my body, searching for signs of injury yet trying not to disturb. "Stop." I choke, "I'm alright... it's you -"" I finally turn to face him, horror and guilt washing over me as I take in the damage.

Sinclair is bleeding, and his body must be covered with bruises. The impact would have killed me, and his shifter strength might have kept him alive, but not even an Alpha wolf can walk away from such an accident unharmed. His handsome face is a tight grimace of pain, but I'm not sure he's even registering the sensations. His attention is focused on me, his green eyes scouring my body for signs of harm.

"Oh Dominic," I choke, my voice thick with emotion as I reach towards his battered body. His shirt has been torn to shreds by glass from the windshield, and I can only imagine how mangled his flesh is underneath. Before I can touch him, I'm distracted by sounds of a struggle in the distance.

I follow the sound with my eyes, catching our chauffeur wrestling the homicidal driver to the ground a few meters down the road. He must have tried to make a run for it when the car stalled, unable to simply plow through Sinclair's iron body the way it would have my own. I immediately recognize the driver as one of the rogues who attacked me in the alley, and suddenly my vision turns completely red.

I forget my concern for myself and the baby, I even forget my worry for Dominic. I feel only a flood of vengeful fury, more violent and feral than any I've known before. That rogue hurt Sinclair. He wanted to end my baby's life and would have taken mine in the process, but he actually did hurt Sinclair. He might have taken my baby's father from us both – from the pack that needs him.

"I'll kill him!" I snarl, pushing myself up on shaky legs and lunging towards the rogue. A steely bar catches me around the waist, pulling me back. "Woah Ella, come here, let me look at you." "No, I want to kill him!" I insist, not recognizing this bloodthirsty woman I've

apparently become.

"I do too, trouble, but right now you're more important." Sinclair murmurs in my ear. I can already hear sirens in the distance, loud, shrill, and drawing closer with every moment that passes.

"I'm fine!" I cry, tears spilling from my overflowing lashes. "He hurt you! Let me go so I can make him pay."

Sinclair is purring, but the sound keeps stuttering in his chest, as if the internal engine that fuels his rumbles and growls has been damaged. "I know little one, we'll make him pay, just take it easy."

Sniffing, I stop fighting, turning to face him once he returns my feet to the ground. "You're all bloody." I observe pitifully, wishing I knew how to heal his wounds. "I want to make him bloody too."

I sound like a petulant toddler, though admittedly a very violent one. Still, Sinclair isn't listening, the stubborn man has his palm pressed to my belly, his eyes scouring me for the hundredth time. "The baby's okay." He sighs, but I need you to tell me where you're hurt, Ella."

Before I can answer, an ambulance skitters to a stop behind the wreckage, and EMT's leap from the back of the vehicle, sprinting over to us. They slow down as they draw near, warily

approaching us as Sinclair holds me tightly and begins to growl protectively. "Alpha," One of the EMT's has his hands up, to show he means no harm. Belatedly I realize the Moon Valley pack's symbol is blazing on the side of the ambulance, marking it as part of a shifter institution.

Of course the shifters got here faster than the humans. I think with relief. And thank goodness, Sinclair's animalistic aggression would have terrified a human – it terrifies the other wolves already. "It's okay." The EMT continues. "We just want to help, we won't hurt her."

Sinclair scents the air, drawing in their aromas and apparently determining them friendly. Gradually he loosens his hold on me, though I can sense how difficult it is for him to do so. Eventually he offers me up for their examination, delivering a menacing warning in the process, "I'm watching you, beta. One wrong move and I'll make you wish you'd never been born."

The EMT approaches me, still keeping his hands up in clear view. Sinclair paces behind us like an enraged bear, and I try to get my breathing under control. "Luna, where are

you bleeding?”

“I’m not!” I exclaim, half-sobbing.” It’s all his blood. I’m fine, he’s the one who was hit.” The EMT look up at Sinclair, searching for confirmation and starting to approach him instead.

“No! Look at her first.” He growls, putting all his Alpha authority into the words and making us all shiver in response. “Dominic, please!” I beg, moving back towards him. “I’m not hurt because you protected me.” I press my palms to his chest, gazing up at him with a pleading expression.

“You did your job, we’re safe.” I continue, praying he’ll listen to reason, or at least be triggered into action by my words. “Rafe and I need you to be okay so you can continue keeping us safe. So we need you to go to the hospital now. We need you to let them help you.”

Sinclair gazes down at me with glowing, uncertain eyes, and I ask one final time. “Please, Dominic.”

Chapter 92 – Stubborn Alpha

Ella

Sinclair finally agreed to let the EMTs administer emergency care, though it wasn't easy. He refused to let me out of his sight, and though he'd tried to maintain physical contact too, the EMTs eventually convinced him to let them strap him onto a gurney for transfer to the hospital. I sat beside him in the ambulance, where he was sprawled on his side, watching me with complete intensity as the EMTs worked on cutting away his clothes.

I stroked his hair as he stoically suffered through their poking and prodding, so he could feel me safe and secure beside him. At first I tried to peek over Sinclair's broad shoulder to see the damage on his back, but he growled as soon as I broke eye contact, and I decided keeping him calm was more important than discovering the extent of his injuries.

The ambulance can't seem to move fast enough, and I'm counting down the moments until we reach the shifter hospital. I can see how tired Sinclair is, his eyelids keep drooping, only to snap back open when he realizes he's falling asleep. I want to help him rest, but I'm also afraid that if he falls asleep he might not wake back up.

"I'm so sorry, Dominic." I murmur, unable to hold in my feelings any more.

"Why are you sorry?" He responds, furrowing his brow. "You didn't do anything wrong." "You're hurt because of me." I remind him, hiccuping and swiping at my tears with my free hand. "They wanted me not you. Why did you do that!"

"Baby, if they could have gotten to me they gladly would have you're just an easier target." He explains, sounding so steady and sure, even as the EMTs dig into his raw wounds. "And! did it because you and Rafe are a million times more important than me."

"But that's simply not true." I argue miserably. "You can find another mate and have more babies –" "A warning rumble vibrates in his chest, but I ignore it. "But if something happens to you then the entire pack, the entire realm would be in danger. I'm replaceable, you're not."

"I beg to differ." Sinclair growls. "And if you keep talking that way you're going to regret it, little mate."

The EMTs exchange amused glances, and I can feel the corner of my own mouth twitching. "Are you really threatening me when you're tied down?"

"If you think I can't break out of a few flimsy straps you're out of your mind, gorgeous." He answers, sounding strong and ominous right up until he winces in obvious pain.

"Tsk, stubborn Alpha." I cluck, still stroking his hair. "Are you in a lot of pain? Be honest."

I add sternly.

“Not nearly as much as I would have been if I’d lost you.” He replies, with utter confidence. My heart swells, but there’s still a knot of pain and confusion tangled at its center. I’m falling in love with this man, so of course I want to hear his affectionate endearments, of course I want him to be alright. But that doesn’t explain away last night. Sweet nothings won’t fix what’s broken between us. I want to ask him where Lydia fits in all this so badly it hurts, but I can’t do that as long as we have an audience.

That mere thought is enough to give me pause. Does he mean any of the things he’s saying, or

is he just putting on a show for the EMTs? And if he does mean it, then how could he be so cold and dismissive last night? Why did he sleep with her?

“What are you thinking?” Sinclair asks, furrowing his brow as he takes in my solemn expression.

“I’m just wondering if it’s safe for you to fall asleep.” I lie, using my thumb to smooth out the wrinkles in his forehead. “You look so tired.”

“He should stay conscious if he can.” The first EMT frowns apologetically. “Just until we know the damage.”

Sinclair smiles at me, though it looks more like a grimace. “I already told you I wasn’t taking my eyes off you, that includes for sleep.”

“We’re almost there.” The second EMT assures me. “He just has to hold on a little longer.”

Of course, when we arrive at the hospital it’s more of the same: Sinclair being impossibly stubborn and overprotective, even though I’m perfectly fine and he’s the one who looks like he’s been put through a meat grinder. Once I can see his back, I understand that the entire broad surface was shredded by the glass of the windshield, and hundreds of tiny shards are still embedded in his skin. The sight is enough to send me into a fresh fit of tears, and I’m beyond angry with myself for giving into the emotion. I know me being upset will do nothing, but rile Sinclair’s wolf further.

Things reach an unfortunate crescendo when they try and take him for x-rays, because of course I can’t go with him. They need to assess the internal damage from the blunt force of the crash, and though the logical part of Sinclair realizes that, the combination of so much danger, my upset, and all the strangers around us has his wolf in full control. In the end it takes getting every guard in the hospital to stand watch over me until he comes back from the X-ray, on threat of death if they let anything happen to me. I told

him he was being ridiculous, but of course he didn't listen.

When he finally returns we end up caught in another disagreement, with him insisting the doctors and nurses can tend to his back while he's sitting up so he can keep me in his lap, and those of us who still have our sanity intact trying to convince him to lie down. It's a losing battle, and in the end I end up in the bed with him, his huge body draped over me while he pretends not to feel the pain of dozens of tiny tweezers digging into his torn flesh to extract all the shards of glass.

I do my best to distract him, kissing his scruffy cheeks and nuzzling his neck, telling him what a powerful protector he is and guiding his hand to my belly so he can feel the pup.

"I know what you're doing." Sinclair chuckles, catching my lips in his the next time I try to graze them over his jaw. "Such blatant pandering, you ought to be ashamed." He teases.

"It's not pandering." I argue, "At least, not entirely. You saved my life today, you saved the baby again. And after I was such a brat to you."

"You had every right," He acknowledges, "even if it was a misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding how?" I clarify, stiffening slightly. The text message I received the night before was very clear. "You can't tell me that wasn't real, Dominic."

Sinclair waits until the doctors are finished bandaging his back before he answers. They leave us alone, promising to bring the x-ray results soon. Once they're out of hearing distance, he

sighs. "Lydia drugged me, Ella." He confesses, sounding completely ashamed of himself. "I was at the pub, I noticed my drink tasted odd and I blacked out. She sent you that text

message. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in her bed."

"Are you serious?" I demand, sitting up in horror. Of all the possible ways I expected him to explain his actions, I never dreamed of this possibility.

"I don't have any idea what happened while I was blacked out and she claims we had sex, but I don't know for sure." Sinclair continues. "But the point is that I haven't been lying to you. I didn't intentionally have sex with her, and I don't want anything to do with her now more. than ever."

"Dominic! Why didn't you tell me?" I cry, outraged that he didn't say anything sooner. "Why did you let me keep spiraling that way?"

Sinclair catches me in his crosshairs, giving me such a searing look of incredulity that I begin curling in on myself. "Oh." I squeak, realizing that he isn't the only one who's been stubborn today. "Because I wouldn't let you?"

"I tried to tell you repeatedly." He confirms, "You wouldn't hear it."

"I'm sorry." I profess, feeling lousy even though the knot in my chest is already beginning to uncoil. "I just got so worked up."

"I know." Sinclair agrees. "With jealousy."

"I didn't say that." I combat, snuggling into his chest. "I can't believe Lydia did that. What in hell was she thinking? Surely she didn't expect that kind of dirty trick to convince you to take her back?"

When Sinclair ignores my continued denial, I know the truth must be worse than I realize. "She was thinking that if she gets pregnant, I won't need you anymore."

Chapter 93 – Proper Luna

Ella

Pain. My first reaction is pain – blistering and hot, like having my body suspended over a pit of flames and slowly roasted. Sinclair won't need me anymore. I'll lose him. For all my resistance, I've become hopelessly attached to Sinclair, and my feelings for him are far stronger than I'd like to admit. The idea of not having him in my life anymore is so excruciating I can't even consider the possibility head-on. I want to run and hide from it, to pretend it isn't real rather than suffer the agony it unleashes.

I breathe through the torment, wondering how much time has passed while I grapple with this news. It feels like hours, but it's probably only been moments. Once the pain passes, there is only denial. Lydia can't be pregnant. She and Sinclair attempted to conceive a child for one night couldn't possibly give them success when years of trying resulted in nothing more than broken hearts and a failed marriage. Right?

years

Of course, it wouldn't be the strangest thing in the world if they did succeed after all this time. My conscience suggests and she's right. How many stories have I heard over the years from well-meaning friends trying to make me feel better about my own infertility struggles? "Just wait, the day you stop trying is the day you'll conceive." they'd say, or, "sometimes the stress alone can keep you from succeeding, at some point you just have to let all that go."

They didn't realize how hurtful it was, almost like they were blaming my infertility on me wanting it too badly. They also didn't appreciate that this might be true for some women, but it's completely false for many others. Some women would never conceive, no matter what they did. Still, they might have been wrong to try and placate me that way, but that doesn't mean those cases never happen. Maybe a blacked out one night stand was what it took for Lydia and Sinclair to finally make a baby together.

What if Lydia is pregnant? I think hesitantly. What if she and Sinclair finally achieved the thing which had cost them their marriage? Could a child be enough to repair the damage in their relationship? Suddenly I see a future where Sinclair and his mate have a child while my own pup and I are able to quietly live in the background no more lies, no more fraud. Completely safe.

Wouldn't that be better than this? Even if I'm heartbroken over Sinclair, isn't my baby's safety more important than anything? Won't I always be sick with guilt as long as I'm continuing this fraud? Isn't it right for the pack to have a true Luna?

No! Something feral and ferocious screams up inside me, Sinclair is ours! She can't have him!

That's selfish. I realize, hating the truth even as I recognize its weight. It's selfish to keep him. for myself if it's not right for him, for the pack. This isn't just about me. It's about millions of people who need Sinclair to lead them.

"And if she is pregnant?" I ask, just barely surfacing from the thoughts attempting to drown

"She's not." Sinclair dismisses easily, echoing my initial thoughts. "we don't even know if I slept with her, and even if I did, we tried for years to no avail."

"But what if she is?" I press, needing him to hear me out. "I mean, if she is pregnant, then

you'll have another potential heir, and its mother will be a she-wolf. That's everything you've been looking for. I have to think that a pup with two shifter parents will be stronger than one with a human mother."

"We don't know that." Sinclair digs in his heels, his sharp gaze piercing me. "And you'll make a better Luna than Lydia ever would."

"We both know that's not true." I correct him gently, wanting to slide out of the bed so he can't use his physical proximity to overpower my senses. "Because no matter what I do, I can never be a real one."

"What are you saying?" Sinclair inquires, frowning deeply now.

"I'm saying that if she is pregnant, that might not be a bad thing." I sigh, trying and failing to leave the protective circle of his arms.

"What?" Sinclair growls, with abject disbelief. I'm not surprised by his reaction, because I'm well aware of how strange it is for me to be making this argument. "Ella, you know what kind of woman Lydia is she's narcissistic and power hungry. In some ways she's as bad as the Prince."

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"I know and I'm not saying she isn't terrible, just that you need a true Luna." I remark with a weak shrug. "And with you there to keep her in check, her worse nature wouldn't ever get out of control."

"Who says I need a true Luna?" Sinclair grumbles, sounding every bit as petty and mutinous. as I must have earlier.

“Says you!” I burst, laughing now. “From day one, Dominic! You’ve been telling me this arrangement of ours is temporary, and only binding until you find a real mate from the first moment we met.”

“Maybe I changed my mind.” He suggests, nuzzling my neck and squeezing me just a bit tighter, as if he’s afraid someone might take me from him. “Maybe I was wrong.”

My heart skips a beat, and butterflies burst to life in my belly. Is that affection all for me? Is he responding to the baby? How is it we’ve built so much intense intimacy between us, and we’ve never done more than kiss?

I decide to test him. “I think Rafe is confusing your instincts, Dominic. It’s easy for you to say this now, but once he’s here with us, I’m going to go back to being just some human you

know.”

Testing him, hmm? The little voice in the back of my head interjects. Sounds to me like you’re just making excuses to keep him at arm’s length.

Unsurprisingly, Sinclair growls at me, making me quake and lean into him for comfort even though he’s the one causing my unease. Now that I don’t want to be separated from him, of course, he sees fit to put some distance between our bodies. He shifts me to face him on the hospital bed, keeping his legs straddled over either side of the gurney and staring me down with stern disapproval. “That isn’t true. I know the difference Ella. You and Rafe are one now, but I don’t want you for my Luna because of him I want you because of you.

“But you weren’t wrong.” I insist, trying not to absorb his compliments. It feels wonderful for him to be speaking this way, but the way I feel doesn’t change the situation we’re in. “Because

it’s one thing to deceive the pack and the Alpha council for the greater good because there is no other option. But Lydia being pregnant would give you another option. An honest option, Dominic.” I clarify, needing him to understand.

“Is that what you want?” He asks gruffly.

“I want my baby to be safe. I don’t want to live a lie.” I answer honestly. “And you don’t want to perpetuate a fraud like this if you don’t have to.” I add pointedly.

“So you think I should take her back, after everything she’s done?” Sinclair bites, looking furious now.

"If she's pregnant, if there's a she-wolf who can fill this role without lying to the people, you have to choose her." I insist. "Keeping up this deception isn't right, no matter how we feel."

"You still haven't told me how you feel, you know that?" Sinclair points out, his powerful hands massaging my waist, surreptitiously holding me in place in case I decide to make a run

for it.

"What does that matter?" I ask, not meeting his gaze. "Last night might have changed everything for us. I know it wasn't your fault," I offer apologetically. "But things are complicated enough already without adding feelings to the mix."

"That may be true, but the feelings are there whether we want them to be or not." Sinclair responds, ducking his head to try and catch my eye.

"I want our son to have two loving parents who can focus all their attention on him, not their own drama." I counter, still evading an honest answer, but feeling dizzy now that I'm away from him.

"Why would our feelings mean that we can't focus on our baby?" Sinclair questions, looking strangely blurry around the edges.

"Because it's already distracting us! We're talking about feelings rather than the real issue here which is that Lydia might be carrying another heir for you already. How is that supposed to work?" I inquire, I reach out towards one of his muscular arms for support. "Would you stop moving, please?"

There are strange spots in my vision, and I try to blink them away, but they don't budge. "Ella?" Sinclair's urgent voice sounds very far away. "Are you feeling okay?"

The last thing I hear before everything goes dark is his frantic call, "I need a nurse over here!"

Chapter 94 – Bed Rest

Sinclair

When Ella collapses in my arms, I can hardly wait for the nurses to come running. I immediately assume we must have missed some injury from the accident, and I'm instantly furious with myself for letting her talk me into being prioritized by the medical staff.

What was I thinking? I know they checked her out and there weren't any physical marks on her body, but what if it was something internal? What if she somehow hit her head amid all the chaos? Deep down I know that doesn't make any sense, she was completely wrapped in my arms when we collided with the car, but my fear isn't logical. It's sudden and violent and overwhelming.

"It's okay, Alpha." The doctor assures me as they move Ella onto a gurney of her own. "It's probably just the stress. There's been a lot of excitement today."

"She has high blood pressure." I warn, "we've been monitoring it daily, but her OBGYN is worried she's developing preeclampsia."

My wolf is growling and whining at once- impatient for the doctors to help Ella, worried for her health, and hating that anyone else is near her when she's so vulnerable. She looks so young and innocent in her unconscious state- so small and fragile. Her rose gold hair is a shining cascade over the flimsy pillow, still streaked with my blood. I stay beside her even after the nurses try to order me away. "I'm not going anywhere." I insist, battling my guilt over whether this is all my fault.

Would she have been so overwhelmed if I hadn't needed her to keep me calm? If I hadn't been such an ogre with the EMTs and the doctors, would she have been free to relax and recover without added stress?

At once, I think about her comments regarding Lydia. On one hand I know she's right, continuing our fraud when there's an honest option changes things completely from a moral standpoint. But beyond morality, if there was a way to protect Ella from all this stress and guilt, from the threats posed by the Prince and being my Luna, shouldn't we pursue that? I've been justifying our arrangement on the grounds that becoming King is the only way to make the pack and my family safe, so the threats she's facing to help me win the crown are necessary. But that won't be true anymore if Lydia conceives.

Should I be trying harder to find a she-wolf to become my Luna? Not for the campaign's sake, but for Ella and Rafe's?

It's not that simple. My wolf insists. The pack aren't going to accept you throwing over Ella for Lydia. You've been doing everything in your power to make them fall in love with

the human and it's worked.

That's not because of me. I remind him., stroking Ella's hair as the nurses take her vital signs and hook her up to an IV. She made them love her all on her own, just by being herself.

And Lydia made them hate her by being herself. He argues. If you come forward and tell them you've decided to take Lydia back, it could cost you the campaign, whether she's breeding or

not.

You may have a point. I acknowledge.

I don't just have a point, I'm completely right and you know it. He replies haughtily.

Fine. I concede, feeling exhausted by this debate, but that doesn't mean it has to stay that way after the campaign is over. Ella deserves to have whatever life she wants if that's a quiet. existence with our pup out of the public eye, then I want to give that to her, even if it means letting Lydia or someone else be Luna after I'm King. That was the original plan, remember? It's not her fault I got lost along the way.

But you're not the only one who's gotten lost along the way. My wolf argues. Think about how jealous she was, how upset she became over the idea that you'd been with another woman. That has to count for something.

"Dominic?" Ella's soft murmur wrenches me from my thoughts. I breathe an instant sigh of relief how long had I been holding my breath? It doesn't seem fair that such a small, harmless creature can tie all my insides into knots the way Ella can. She thinks she's powerless. I muse, standing to lean over her bed, yet there is no one on earth who has ever had so much power over me.

The doctors had declared Ella dehydrated, stressed and hypertensive, but otherwise unharmed, leaving me to brood over my thoughts while I waited for her to wake. Her OBGYN is on his way in, but until he arrives, we're alone.

"You naughty girl." I tease, stroking her soft cheek. "Fainting to get out of telling me your feelings?"

"It wasn't on purpose." She pouts, looking over me with obvious concern. "Why are you out of bed? What about your x-rays?"

"Don't worry about me, sweetheart." I encourage, "how are you feeling?"

“Sort of hungover.” She admits, trying to sit up. I gently catch her shoulder, keeping her in place. Eventually she huffs, “Dominic, I have to pee.”

“Well why didn’t you say so?” I’m still smiling at her like an absolute idiot, so relieved that she’s awake and talking to me that my tormented thoughts have taken a backseat for now at least. I scoop her up into my arms, unhooking her IV so I can take her to the restroom.

Ella squeaks, holding her hands crossed over her chest as if she’s afraid to touch me. “What are you doing!?! You’re hurt, you shouldn’t be doing this!”

“Don’t worry, trouble. I heal fast.” I assure her, glaring at the nurses we pass, each of whom look as though they’d like to chastise me as well. They all cower beneath my forbidding glower, and a fresh wave of amusement passes over me as I think about how much harder it is to intimidate the human in my arms.

“Not that fast.” Ella insists, gnawing on her lower lip and seeming to forget the cut she gave herself earlier until her sharp little teeth dig into the wound. She gasps with pain, so I tsk and

purr.

“If you keep that up I’m going to have to find some way to keep your lips occupied so you can’t keep biting yourself.” I intone darkly, realizing too late that this might have sounded even more lascivious than I intended.

Ella doesn’t seem to mind. Her heart thumps loudly against her ribs, and her pupils dilate with interest. Luckily if there is one thing that can kill a mood quickly, it’s a bathroom. I deposit Ella on the toilet and calmly weather her glares and admonishments until I finally leave her to

take care of things in private, making her promise to call for me when she’s done. Instead I hear the commode flush and the sink running, so I push the door open to glare at her, “Ella you’re a fall risk.”

“And you’re an overprotective ogre.” She counters, drying her hands and climbing back into my arms so willingly that my wolf completely melts. Indeed, she comes to me so sweetly I have to fight to maintain my stern demeanor, reminding myself that I musn’t coddle her, no matter how tempting.

“Do you think that just because I’m injured and you’re in a delicate condition I’ll let you get away with defying me?” I rumble in Ella’s ear, chuckling when she shivers in response.

“How long have I been asleep?” The brazen creature asks, ignoring my question.

“About half an hour.” I inform her, “and my x-rays did come back while you were out. I’m going to be fine.”

“Good.” She breathes, sounding as though a huge weight is leaving her shoulders.

“You were really worried, weren’t you?” I inquire, settling her back in her bed.

“How could I not be?” Ella asks in return, blinking up at me with wide eyes. “I mean, I know you’re strong, but that car... it’s a miracle you’re not more hurt after an accident like that.” “I’m fine.” I promise, dropping a kiss to her hair. “You don’t have to worry about me, Ella.”

She shoots me a challenging stare. “I’d like to see you take your own advice.”

flash my fangs at her, but the OBGYN interrupts us, “Knock, knock.” He says, peaking around the curtain surrounding our ER bay. “I hear you two have been causing some real chaos among the nursing staff here, defying all the hospital’s protocols.”

“I’m innocent.” Ella immediately announces, pointing at me. “It was all him.

I throw my head back and laugh, ignoring the pain which ricochet’s down my back. “Oh you’re really determined to dig yourself into a hole aren’t you, baby?” I remark ominously, stroking, her nape.

“I’m just being honest.” She shrugs, a mischievous glint in her eye..

“Well I think it’s safe to say you’ve had more than enough excitement for the time being.” The doctor shares, giving us a reluctant frown. “I’m afraid we’ve reached the point where you need to go on bed rest, Ella.”

Chapter 95 – Returning the Favor

Ella

“Bed rest?” I repeat, glancing nervously at Sinclair. “You mean until the baby comes?”

“No, I don’t think we have to do anything quite that extreme yet.” The doctor replies with a kind smile, “For now let’s start with a few weeks. Beyond that we can take it as it comes.” “What does that mean exactly?” Sinclair inquires, his large body looming over me. His heat, which sometimes reminds me too much of a blazing furnace when we’re curled in bed together, is a welcome balm now, washing over me in a tide of cozy comfort. “She can’t out of bed at all?”

get “No, it’s not that severe.” The doctor assures us. “Ella can get up to go to the restroom, or move around to switch positions. She can take two short walks every day one in the morning, one in the evening but no more than twenty minutes and if you find yourself getting tired or overwhelmed before then, you need to stop. Absolutely no stairs or physical exertion though, and no standing for more than twenty minutes at a time for any reason.”

My heart sinks, and I try not to let my disappointment show. It’s not the end of the world. after all, it just means I’m going to be a bit bored. “Do I have to be completely on my back, or is sitting up okay?”

“Choose whatever position is most comfortable for you.” He continues, looking back and forth between us. “More importantly, no stress whether you’re in bed, on the couch, or wherever you choose. That means no campaign events, no excitement.”

“And if she does get excited, despite our efforts?” Sinclair inquires, an odd note in his voice.

“I’m going to send you home with some sedatives in case of emergencies, and while I would advise you keep sexual activity to a minimum, if the tension is building up it’s better to indulge it than to resist just remind your wolf to be gentle with her.”

I blink. Who said anything about sex? Is that what Sinclair was getting at, but I just didn’t understand the nuance? How is that not physical exertion?

Don’t be daft, you know orgasms are the best stress relievers. The little voice in my head remarks.

Oh Goddess, when was the last time I had one of those? I think back, recalling the last night I slept away from Sinclair, when I was finally free to get some relief from the fire he keeps constantly lit inside me.

Too long, and you have to admit it would be nice to have one you didn't give yourself. The voice answers.

That would be a first, I snort. Mike is the only man I've ever been with, and he'd never seemed to understand that women can't just magically get off with a few thrusts. I always enjoyed sex for the intimacy, and though it always felt good, orgasms had always been my own responsibility mine to seek once he rolled over and fell asleep.

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You know it wouldn't be that way with Sinclair. My conscience intimates, sparking memories of the few times we've gotten carried away when I've had glimpses of the pleasure he could give me if I would only succumb to his charms. His words the day of the ball after the

incident, as I've decided to call it – ring in my mind: Now, would you like me to make you feel good? Nothing about his own desires, nothing about going further – just a selfless offer to fulfill my needs.

Shut up. I think sharply, unsure whether I'm speaking to the memory or my inner voice. Sinclair is watching me like a hawk, and the hungry expression he's wearing makes me worry that my expression is giving away my lurid thoughts. Before he can say a word, I lean into his side, turning my face towards his shoulder so I can breathe in his scent. I'm doing it for comfort yes, but also to hide my blushing features. Sinclair purrs softly, still stroking my nape, and thanks the doctor.

"I appreciate you coming on such short notice. Can I take her home now?" He asks bluntly, as if I'm the injured party here, rather than him.

"Dominic, you're in much worse condition than I am." I remind him sulkily. "We should be asking your doctors, not mine."

He raises one dark brow at my challenge, but otherwise doesn't acknowledge my words. He looks back to the OB, who smiles warmly, "she's free to go as soon as I write this prescription. I'll come and check on her the day after tomorrow, but call me if anything comes up before then."

"Oh fine, ignore me, talk about me like I'm not here." I grumble. "That will keep me calm." "Don't worry Ella, you're in good hands." The doctor replies, completely unphased by my petulant words. "I'll see you soon."

The moment he turns away, Sinclair moves in front of me, sliding his muscular arms around my middle and burying his face in my neck. I'm so surprised by the gesture, that I barely notice I forgot to thank the doctor. Sinclair isn't growling, or scolding me, he's not

even kissing me or trying to sneak an intimate caress, he's simply hugging me – squeezing me with barely restrained force.

Sensing that this isn't his usual mischief or bossiness, I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders, returning the embrace and nuzzling his scruffy jaw. "Hey, what is it?" I murmur, holding him as tightly as I can so that he knows I'm asking out of concern, not some desire to be released. It's only when I feel the bandages beneath his shirt that I remember his wounds, but as soon as I try to take my arms away, Sinclair rumbles in protest.

He lifts his face from my neck, only high enough to speak into my ear. "Today was horrible." He says, his voice like gravel, "every last minute of it. And now this."

"I'm okay, though." I answer softly. "And so is the baby this is just a precaution."

"I don't like it." He insists, sounding as sullen as I was feeling a few minutes ago. "You shouldn't have to worry about this on top of everything else... and I hate that I can't... I can't protect you from this."

And here I thought I was the one on a roller coaster of emotions. In a matter of a few hours, Sinclair had gone from rabid protector, to bossy nurse, and teasing, would-be lover. Now here he is, clinging to me like a child might cling to a teddy bear, beside himself with feelings of helplessness in light of my condition. I suddenly realize that his day started off even worse than my own waking up drugged with a psychotic ex, then finding me missing, tracking me down and weathering a tantrum he did not deserve.

"I'm sorry." I tell him, my voice sounding smaller than I'd like. "I'm sorry for the way I acted

earlier, and I'm sorry I scared you when I ran, and with the accident, and fainting that way. I wish I could turn back time and undo this entire day and yesterday for that matter."

"It's certainly been an eventful week." He jokes, his deep bass dripping with irony. "But none of it has been your fault."

"I'm still sorry." I repeat, kissing his neck. "You've been killing yourself taking care of me, and I've been a brat. You deserve better." I hate that I'm near tears already, but I don't think my wild emotions are going to even out any time soon. "I think it's time you let me return the favor."

"You already did." He purrs, rocking me ever so slightly as he strokes my hair. "You kept me calm today when no one else could. You probably saved the lives of some of these nurses."

At first I take it as a joke, but after more thought I realize he's probably being completely literal. "It's not enough, I want to do more."

"You just got put on bed rest, little one." Sinclair reminds me, pulling back to take my face in his massive hands. Despite his stern tone, his green eyes soften as he looks down at me. "I appreciate that you want to help me, Ella. But the only thing that could possibly fix this would be for the doctor to walk back over here and tell me his diagnosis was a mistake. I'm afraid I'm going to be feeling this way until our baby is here and you're both safe and healthy."

"You're right" I acknowledge, clasping his wrists and giving him my best puppy-dog eyes. "I can't fix this, but there must be something I can do to make you feel better even on bedrest" I plead, a devious thought occurring to me then. "You know I won't be able to truly relax if I'm worried about you."

Sinclair huffs out a laugh, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "I swear, you're going to be the death of me, trouble."

I peek up at him from beneath my lashes. "Is that a yes?"

Chapter 96 – Ella and Sinclair Reach an Understanding

Ella

“Why does it feel like this is more for my benefit than yours?” I inquire archly, watching as Sinclair pours oils and salts into a large, steaming bath. The clever wolf knows how much I love a bubble bath, especially now that I’m pregnant. After years of constantly being dirty and even living on the street, there is nothing else that feels so luxurious to me and I can’t think of anything more relaxing.

“Hey, I was going to get in with you you’re the one who put your foot down.” Sinclair replies with a wolfish grin, skimming his fingers through the water to check the temperature.

“Because you have open wounds!” I exclaim, exasperated but also impatient for the preparation to be over so I can sink into the deep tub. “The doctors said you couldn’t submerge your injuries until the scabs are gone.”

Amazingly, the gashes on his back have already scabbed over. It seems that he truly wasn’t lying when he told me that shifters heal faster than humans, but I hadn’t expected him to heal quite so fast. At this rate his wounds will be mere scars in a couple of days.

“Which is why I’ll be supervising, not participating.” Dominic shrugs, I wonder if that hurts. him? I ponder, watching the muscles rippling in his back. He certainly doesn’t show any signs of pain.

He’s so strong. My traitorous conscience moons, and for a moment I actually think I see stars in my eyes.

Rolling my eyes at my inner voice, I cross my arms over my chest. “The idea was to help us both relax.” I sigh, guilt gnawing at my insides.

“Believe it or not, Ella, but taking care of you does help me relax.” Sinclair declares coolly, pressing a button that triggers the whirlpool jets built into the tub. A steady thrumming sound whirs to life as the water begins to churn, foaming and bubbling even higher now.

“Oh sure, I’m sure your version of supervision will ensure neither of us get the least bit excited as you and the doctor so elegantly put it.” I snark.

The big wolf flashes his fangs, flames dancing in his eyes as he finally turns away from the bath. “If I didn’t know any better I’d think you were worried about losing control with me.” He observes darkly, “but I can’t imagine why that would be, unless of course your feelings for me are stronger than you’re letting on.”

“Now you’re just fishing.” I accuse, narrowing my eyes at Sinclair, even as he prowls toward me across the tiled floor.

“Am I?” His dark brows incline towards his hairline. “Because I have no problem admitting mine.”

“Don’t!” I interrupt, feeling a sudden spike of panic. “Seriously Dominic, whatever you’re going to say, I don’t want to know.”

“I thought we were past that, sweetheart.” He scolds, “didn’t you learn your lesson about actually hearing me out when I want to tell you something

“This is different.” I insist, “it honestly stresses me out.”

Sinclair pauses, studying me closely. He’s only a few paces away now, but the longer he observes me, the softer his ravenous expression becomes. “Has it occurred to you that part of the reason you’re so stressed is because you’re trying to fight the inevitable, Ella?”

“Dominic, what stresses me out is bringing a wolf pup into a world I don’t belong to or understand, while living a lie and dodging constant death threats.” I snap, before I can consider how the Alpha might take my words. “Can you really blame me for wanting to keep things simple in the face of all that? If we lose focus for even a moment, this could all fall

apart.

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He stops dead in his tracks, and I can see a great wall of guilt slam into him. I know he’s not focusing on my logic, but on the blame I’ve basically just foisted upon him. “Wait... that came

fault out wrong.” I try to backtrack. “Dominic, I didn’t mean that any of this is your “You might not have meant it that way, but you weren’t wrong.” Sinclair declares gutturally, his face a full shade paler than it was a moment ago. “It is my fault if I were a normal man, I hadn’t forced you into this situation, you probably wouldn’t have any complications at all.” “No.” I object, my voice thick with emotion. “You didn’t force me into this, Dominic. And there’s no way to know whether any of this is connected. Mike destroyed my reproductive system and plenty of healthy women develop this condition -”

“Maybe so,” He interrupts sharply, “but our situation certainly isn’t making things any better.” Sinclair is pacing now, resembling a tiger in a cage.

"Please don't do this." I beg, hiccupping on a sob. "Please don't blame yourself for this. You're trying to do the right thing for everyone here. Neither one of us planned this, neither one of us could have prepared for what the world would throw at us these last few months. I don't blame you, I just don't want things to get more complicated than they have to be."

At the sight, or perhaps scent, of my tears, Sinclair deflates, closing the final distance between us and pulling me into his arms. "I'm sorry." He croons in my ear, stroking my spine and kissing my hair. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Here I am, supposed to be keeping you relaxed and I'm making you cry."

My feet are still on the ground, but I don't want them to be. I begin clambering up the huge man like a monkey climbing a tree, until my arms and legs are wrapped around him and I'm weeping into his neck. "It's not your fault." I repeat pitifully. "I cry over everything now."

"Shh," He coos, sitting down on the edge of the bath. "It's okay, you're not going to break me with a few tears, trouble." He says this, but I can hear the pain in his voice, I can still see the horrible expression on his face.

A steady purr takes up residence in his chest as he deftly strips off my clothes. He tries to deposit me in the bath, but I won't let go, afraid that he'll leave if I release him. Instead he manages to pull off his slacks, shirt and boxers without dislodging me, before sinking into the tub with me still in his arms. I try to protest about his back, but he just hushes me and continues submerging us in the hot water.

It's quite some time before my tears slow enough to talk again, and I realize this isn't even the first breakdown I've had today. "I love this baby," I murmur after a while, "but I'm getting really sick of crying all the time."

Sinclair's lips graze my temple. "I don't think that's his fault either. Maybe some of it -"

if

"The bacon." I remind him, thinking of my most ridiculous fit yet.

"The bacon." He agrees, sounding almost amused. "But not the rest. You have every reason to be upset, Ella. I should have listened to you earlier, before you fainted. You tried to tell me this was all too much and I was too preoccupied with romance to really consider how right you were. It's exactly like you said, I'm letting my feelings distract me from what's really important, and that's the campaign. And it's you and Rafe."

"What are you saying?" I sniffle, fearing I know the answer, and unable to decide whether or not I hope I'm right.

“I’m saying I think you were right. If Lydia is pregnant it might be for the best, and if she isn’t I should try to find another she-wolf to be Luna after we get through the campaign.” Sinclair proclaims, his deep voice sounding hollow – almost as if it belongs to someone else.

Luckily I’m still curled around him like a baby sloth, so I hide my face in his shoulder to prevent him from seeing my disappointment. I don’t understand it myself. I know this is the right decision, I know it’s the most logical solution for our problems, and I don’t plan on arguing it but it still hurts. It still feels like I’m being ripped apart from the inside out.

“Thank you.” I breathe, despite my breaking heart. “I’m trying really hard, but I don’t know if I can get through another week like this one with my sanity intact.” I confess, recalling everything that’s happened in such a short time: blackmail, Roger learning the truth, Lydia drugging Sinclair, our fight, the car crash, the hospital, now this. Has it really only been three days?

“Bed rest will help.” Sinclair promises, “just you wait, in a week or so you’re going to be so bored you’ll be wishing for another blackmailer just to shake up the monotony.”

I hiccup a laugh, and finally relax against him as my tears slow at long last.

Of course, after two weeks of bed rest, it’s not a blackmailer awaiting me it’s a text from Lydia. There are no words, only a photo, one displaying the unmistakable image of a positive pregnancy test.

Todave Ro

Chapter 97 – Lydia’s Pregnant

“Well, I guess that settles that.” I muse, staring at the image dominating the narrow screen of my smart phone. Granted, it was sent by the woman I saved as “Satan’s Mistress” in my contacts and is centered right below the photo of Lydia and Sinclair in bed together, but there’s no mistaking the sight of a positive pregnancy test.

I’ve taken enough home tests in my life to understand what the two pink lines filling the small results window mean they’re the sight I wished for a thousand times but never saw.

I’m trying to keep the pain and disappointment out of my voice so that Sinclair won’t know how upset I am, though I don’t know why I bother. It seems he can read me like a book, even at the best of times.

Whether he can sense it or not, I’m devastated to know Lydia is pregnant, that her scheme worked. Even though this solves some of our problems, I hate to think that she’s getting rewarded for her duplicity, and I despise the idea of Sinclair starting a family with anyone else

even if it’s in my baby’s best interest.

“Not yet it doesn’t.” Sinclair replies, his big body still wrapped around me in our bed. “Not until I know the test is real, and even then it might not be my pup. I wouldn’t put anything past Lydia at this point.”

“So you have to go see her?” I guess, fighting the strange but increasingly familiar urge to growl.

“Yes.” He confirms, not sounding any more excited about it than I am. He shifts my body beneath his, balancing his weight on his elbows. “I’ll go by her hotel on my lunch break.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I question, sliding my hands over his muscular chest. What if she tries to drug you again, or pull some other kind of trick?”

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“She succeeded last time because she bribed a waitress to put something in my drink.” He reminds me, sharing the details we learned after his guards investigated the staff at the bar he’d visited that fateful night. “I didn’t know she was anywhere in the vicinity, or I would have been much more careful. I’m not going to let my guard down with her.”

“Fine,” I huff, “but if she lays a hand on you I’m going to rip her head off.” I remark, already fantasizing about doing just that.

“Oh I see,” Sinclair answers, a teasing note in his voice. “So you can rip peoples heads off but I can’t?”

“Yes.” I reply primly, “because in my case it’s just a fantasy, in yours it’s an actual possibility.”

Sinclair chuckles, nuzzling my neck and pausing to nibble the spot where it meets my shoulder. “I bet you could rip off some heads if you really wanted to.” He states, sounding as if the idea pleases him very much. “You should have seen yourself trying to go after the driver who hit me.”

“Well I guess we’ll never know, because you didn’t let me avenge you.” I grumble sullenly.

“Poor, mistreated Ella.” Sinclair croons, shifting to dip his tongue into the hollow of my clavicle. “Not allowed out of bed, not allowed to slaughter your enemies. What did you ever do to deserve such abuse?”

“You tell me, you’re the one holding the keys to my jail cell.” I challenge, arching my chest in a blatant attempt to encourage him downward. Unfortunately or fortunately I suppose, he has enough restraint to resist.

“I promise I’ll take you anywhere you want to go just as soon as the doctor clears you, sweetheart.” Sinclair promises, lifting his head from my body.

“What ever happened to that driver anyway?” I ask, realizing that I was so distracted by my medical condition and Lydia’s scheming that I almost forgot about our would-be murderer.

“We can talk about that later.” Sinclair announces, “I have a few other updates for you, but there isn’t time now.”

I slide my knees up so I can tangle our legs together. I know he’s getting ready to scent mark me, which means he’s also getting ready to leave for the day. However, being stuck on best rest has made me a bit clingy, since I can’t see Sinclair except for the times he’s home.

When he feels my legs wrapping around his own, Sinclair chuckles darkly, sparing one of his hands to stroke the length of my leg. “You trying to stop me from leaving, trouble?” He asks, pausing to massage the muscles in my calf.

“Of course not.” I lie, adopting an innocent expression. “I just like feeling close to you.”

“Mmm, I like being close to you too.” Sinclair professes warmly, kissing my pulse point.

“Now be a good girl and let me scent mark you.”

Wanting to stall him, to keep him in bed with me forever, I inquire. “Dominic, if I’m on bed rest then why do you need to scent mark me? I’m not going to be seeing anyone.”

His eyes flash with emerald light, and I know his wolf has risen to my challenge. “We don’t know that for sure, what if some other wolf comes sniffing around the manor?”

“How would they get past all your guards?” I pose, narrowing my eyes with suspicion.

“Mmm, you can never trust wolves.” He declares, his fangs extending in a predatory grin.

“Says the hungry wolf in my bed.” I laugh, trying not to squirm as he drags those fangs over my ear lobe.

“What’s wrong, little human, are you worried I might gobble you up?” Sinclair teases, his voice a low rumble that makes my insides turn to jelly.

“I’m just wondering why I need to smell like you just to lie in bed all day.” I answer, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Because you always need to smell like me.” Sinclair insists, raking his dark gaze over my body with relish. “You’re mine whether you’re in public or private.”

I positively quiver when he claims me for his own, and though my inner feminist wants to be outraged, I can’t deny how delicious it feels to be wanted this way especially by a man such as Sinclair. “Why is it I feel like I’m talking to your wolf right now, rather than you?” I joke, knowing full well that this is exactly the case. From the moment I challenged him about scent marking, his inner animal rose to the surface, pushing the logical man I’ve come to adore into the backseat.

“Baby, my wolf and I are one in the same.” Sinclair reasons, even as he pulls off my night dress and begins to rub his body against mine.

“Maybe, but it’s very obvious when he’s in control. You start acting like a treasure-obsessed dragon who’s mistaken me for some sparkly trinket.”

Sinclair rumbles in protest, pausing to look down at me with a foreboding expression. “How dare you, you’re so much more than some trinket or trophy, Ella.”

“You know what I mean.” I laugh, rolling my eyes.

“I do,” He concedes, eyes glittering. “but the real question is why you’re delaying something you need just as badly as I do.”

The terrible thing is that he's right. I'm trying to delay the scent marking because I know he'll leave once it's over, but I do need him to mark me. I need to feel his claim on me, to feel the proof that I belong to Dominic Sinclair.

The bigger the baby grows, the sharper my senses become. I can smell Sinclair now, the way only a shifter can. It's not like with humans, whose aromas are combinations of body odors, soaps and colognes that linger on the skin. Wolf scents are so much deeper than that; powerful essences that exude from the pores and bear strange and mysterious magics. Sinclair's is all balsam and warm, spiced honey, plus a heady, masculine musk all his own.

I can feel when the strength of his scent fades from my body after a long time apart, and it makes me feel oddly incomplete like I'm suddenly missing a piece of myself. There's also a primal part of me which wants to ensure he doesn't go to see his mate the she-wolf who's carrying another one of his babies without claiming me first.

I'm already fighting a great conflagration of jealousy at the idea that she's carrying his child. I want to destroy her, I want to smother him with my own scent before he goes to her, to stake my claim on him so Lydia knows that he's mine no matter what she does.

Suddenly I find myself doing just that. As soon as the thought occurs to me, I find myself rubbing my body all over his, aggressively wriggling against him, determined to cover every inch of his skin in my own essence. Of course, this is much harder for me than it is for Sinclair. He's so large that he can easily wrap himself around me and cover my whole body. I, on the other hand, have to take extra care to ensure I haven't missed a spot. I don't understand what's come over me, it's like I've been possessed by some wild spirit which won't rest until this man bears my mark then again, much of pregnancy feels this way. I don't have any control over what my body does these days.

Sinclair is purring and chuckling at once, both pleased and amused by my wolfish behavior. I pause, shooting him a suspicious glare, "Are you laughing at me?"

Sinclair grins. "I like seeing you like this. So possessive so much ferocity in such a tiny package." His hands are stroking my sides, exploring the curves of my naked body in a sensual dance that is fanning the flames already consuming me. "It's adorable, and incredibly sexy."

I can feel myself flushing, I can also feel a very familiar and dangerous heat pooling in my belly. If we keep this up, we're going to start kissing, and if we start kissing... well, I'm not sure how much longer either of us can hold ourselves back from one another. This thought is enough to finally cool my overheated blood we've agreed to be friends, not to overcomplicate things.

I slump back down onto the bed, throwing my arm over my eyes so I can't see Sinclair's handsome face or rock hard body. "You should go." I sigh, trying to be strong. "This is getting

out of hand."

There's a long beat of silence, but when Sinclair speaks again I know he must have reigned in his own desires, recognizing the slippery slope we were headed down. "I'm sorry, Ella." His weight lifts from the bed, and I feel his soft lips graze mine, "I'll call you as soon as I've seen Lydia. And if you can promise to try and be less irresistible, I'll promise not to go telling you how much you turn me on. Deal?"

I can't help but laugh, moving my arm so I can see his sultry smile, "deal."

Chapter 98 – Sinclair Visits His Ex

Sinclair

When I arrive at Lydia's hotel, I'm still thinking about Ella. We've been doing well over the last two weeks, keeping our relationship affectionate but resisting our shared desires as best we can. So far we've been able to avoid getting more intimate than we'd already become before the doctor ordered bed rest, but the sexual tension is still building – and the suggestion that Ella could be less irresistible is nothing short of ridiculous.

What's more, the baby is making her more wolf-like every day, and I'm worried our restraint can't last much longer. Her efforts to scent mark me today made that only too obvious. Before long she's going to start pushing me like any she-wolf denied her needs, either challenging my dominance or seducing me outright. It will be up to me to resist, even though denying her needs goes against my every instinct.

I know we made the right decision about staying just friends, especially since I've already let my attraction to Ella distract me from the campaign more than once. I was so preoccupied with the beautiful human that I missed rogues pouring into my borders, and it cost the pack dearly. I got drugged and apparently bred like a prize stud because I was too busy gushing about her to a pack of bar flies than keeping my guard up.

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None of that is to mention the harm I'm doing to Ella and our baby by keeping her in this fraudulent political game. I need to confirm Lydia's pregnancy or find another Luna and whomever I choose would never accept me having a relationship with Ella in private. That means we have to find a way to be together without romance getting in the way, and so far we're failing. I'm failing her again.

I knock on the door of Lydia's room, trying to push down memories of the last time I was here. I can't decide how I feel about this supposed pregnancy. On one hand, the last thing I want is to have Lydia back in my life. On the other, a baby born from her would solve some of my problems the pack would accept me returning to my fated mate more easily than they would understand me leaving Ella for another woman.

Still, I can't help but thinking the best solution to all this would be to find a she-wolf to be Luna after the campaign, and to keep Rafe as my heir. That way we avoid Lydia's awfulness, while still giving Ella the safety and comfort she deserves.

my

Before I can consider the idea further, the door swings open, revealing Lydia in a hotel bathrobe. She's wearing a knowing smirk, and her dark hair is still wet from the shower. "Dominic, I've been expecting you." She preens, dropping her hand to her belly. "Or

should I call you Daddy?"

My wolf

gags in my head, and I can't blame him. It amazes me to know how attractive I once found this woman. The idiocy of youth, I suppose, and the cruel tricks of fate.

I promptly scent the air, pushing past the fragrant soaps and shampoos lingering on her skin. I can smell her familiar, distinct aroma: the cloying combination of lemon and pine. At one time it had smelled natural and fresh to me, now it just reminds me of floor cleaner I can't smell a pup in her womb, which doesn't mean she isn't breeding, but it does mean the child doesn't belong to me.

I could smell Rafe from down the hall when Ella was only ten days along, but it's been two weeks since the apparent conception and I can't detect a single hint of my own essence in Lydia.

"Nice try, Lydia, but if you are pregnant, it's not mine." I announce, overflowing with triumphant glee.

"What. How can you say that!?" She exclaims. "I'm not some slut, Dominic, I don't sleep with just anyone."

Belatedly I realize she must not understand how quickly the bond between a father and pup forms. She probably thought she had plenty of time to figure out how to pass of the child as mine, or to conceive one for real.

"Darling, having never been pregnant, you couldn't possibly know this," I state coldly, watching her flinch at my cruel phrasing and imagining Ella scolding me for intentionally targeting her weak spot. "But if you were carrying my child, I would be able to smell it. Even

now."

Lydia's mouth opens and closes as she struggles to find the right words. "Are you sure about that?" She finally challenges, "you wouldn't want to risk being wrong about something so important."

I stalk forward, rudely reaching for her middle and uncinching her robe. I press my palm to her stomach, telling myself that she deserves this and more. After all, this is nothing compared to drugging someone and sleeping with them when they can't consent. Again I feel. nothing, no pulse of life, no tiny consciousness or connection. "I'm sure." I proclaim fiercely. "As soon as the egg implants, the bond to the father forms. If you are breeding, it isn't mine."

Her hands close into fists, and she bares her fangs. "Goddess damn it!" She explodes, wrenching her body away from me and yanking her robe closed. "If you had just cooperated. from the beginning -"

"Wait," I interrupt. "What do you mean, if I had cooperated?"

She growls, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "Do you have any idea the lengths I went to in order to drug you, Dom? To get you back here? That was supposed to be the hard part but of course, you never make anything easy! You were out of your head on GHB, and still all you could think about was that little whore of yours! You didn't want anything to do with me, you kept going back and forth between gushing over how wonderful she is and asking for her, trying to leave so you could go find her. I had to practically tie you down just to keep you here, and then nothing I tried got you even a little aroused I should have shown you her photo, I'm sure you would have been hard in an instant!"

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"So we didn't even have sex?" I clarify, relief coursing through my veins.

"Are you kidding? Your cock was like a limp noodle!" She bursts out, glaring at me. "I swear, that bitch must be a witch. I'm still your fated mate, I ought to be able to turn you on if nothing else."

"What can I say?" I shrug, feeling very smug now. "Now that my wolf has gotten a taste of Ella, you can't expect him to settle for anything less – and you are absolutely, unequivocally less, Lydia."

Her eyes blaze, glowing with her inner wolf. There's anger reflected in her dark irises, but also

a world of pain. "Of course I am. How many times did you even fuck her before she got pregnant? Once? Some sluts just open their legs and magically conceive, while the rest of us struggle for years."

"You don't know Ella." I growl. "It wasn't like that, and it hasn't been easy for her." For one moment, I allow myself to feel for her, for this she-wolf who I spent so many years trying to make a family with. Our disappointment and failure was shared for so long, at a time when we both felt like our bodies were betraying us neither able to fulfill their core function of procreation. I've moved past that now, but I know Lydia is still living it. "It's not your fault that we couldn't get pregnant, and I would never never blame you for that." I begin.

Tears well in Lydia's eyes, and she interrupts me before I can continue.. "You say it's not my fault, but the truth is that it was. You knocked Ella up without even trying, didn't you? That means that I was the problem all along."

"I'm sorry, Lydia." I profess, surprised to find I mean it. "But that's not why she's better. The difference is that Ella is good and kind, and she only ever wanted to be a mother because she has so much love to give not because it was a way for her to secure power. I know that doesn't make failing easier, but Ella is truly worthy of being a Luna because she will selflessly sacrifice herself for her people or her family, and you never would."

"I don't need to be pregnant to ruin you." Lydia threatens, tears spilling down her cheeks. "If the pack finds out you spent the night with me it won't matter they'll turn on you all the same." Something truly bitter enters her voice now, and I suddenly realize the depth of her hatred for Ella. "She won them over so easily. She just batted her lashes and they fell at her feet, just like you. They'll take her side if the story comes out, even though you've been Alpha for years."

"So what? You're going to hold a press conference?" I growl.

"I'll leak the story to the papers." She corrects me fiercely. "And they'll believe me, because I have the photographs. I have proof. I'll end your campaign once and for all."

Chapter 99 – Sinclair Tells Ella

Sinclair

My wolf is clawing at the surface of my skin, determined to be let out so he can tear Lydia to shreds. Gritting my teeth, I narrow my eyes at the malevolent she wolf. “Lydia, you are the second person who has attempted to blackmail me this month, and I have to tell you – this is getting really old.”

Rolling my eyes, I continue. “And you seem to be forgetting that I’m on the board of the Moon Valley associated press. I hold shares in every major publication in the city. What’s more, none of the outlets want the Prince to win the campaign, because if he does the free press disappears.”

Lydia snarls, throwing her hands up, “fine, then I’ll simply text it to every person I know! It will get around that way!”

“And I’ll refute it.” I inform her coldly. “I’ll say it’s an old photo from when we were married, and the pack will believe me, because you are a traitor who abandoned them.” As I speak, I scan the room for her phone. If I refute her story, it’s true that the pack will probably side with me, but I honestly don’t want to risk it..

I finally see her device, lying on the hotel bed’s pristine white coverlet. Straightening up to my full height, I stride closer to Lydia, towering over her. “You’ve gone too far this time, Lydia.” I declare, backing her into the wall. “I’m going to let you walk away, but you have to go now. Leave Moon Valley by sunset, and don’t come back.”

“Or what?” She mutters bitterly, tears still hovering on her lashes. “You’ll kill me?”

“You aren’t my mate anymore.” I remind her, “And you never deserved to be in the first place. I will kill you if you make me, but it doesn’t have to be that way. Go back to your husband, adopt a child if that’s what you want, but stay the hell away from my family.”

Lydia shakes her head, still full of defiance, even as the scent of her fear grows stronger with every moment that passes. “I don’t believe you. I don’t believe you’d actually harm me.”

With an abundance of control, I close my fist around her throat, glowering down at her and letting her feel the full force of my rage. “You took my brother from me, for more than a decade.”

I remind her. “You saw fit to ignore fate until you thought you could benefit from it, and you blamed our fertility struggles on me for years.” My voice is barely more than a snarl, and though I no longer feel insecure about this particular slight, it doesn’t change the hurt it inflicted at the time.

I press on, watching the panic grow in Lydia's eyes as her air supply is abruptly cut off. "You left when the pack needed a strong Luna most. You have endangered everyone in Moon Valley with your selfishness, you cleared the way for a Tyrant to claim the throne. You drugged me, tried to steal my sperm, and on top of everything else, you made my Ella cry."

I hiss, amazed to discover my wolf finds this as offensive as Lydia pushing the pack to the brink of war. Of course it was more than just tears, Ella ran away because of Lydia's tricks, she might have been killed if I hadn't found her so quickly. "The only reason you're not dead already is because you were my mate, but that protection is gone now."

I release her abruptly, moving to the bed and snatching up her phone while she remained huddled against the wall, gasping for air. "You have until sunset, Lydia. After that, all bets are off."

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I storm out of the room, not pausing to look back. I don't need to I can hear Lydia's back sliding down the wall so she can huddle on the floor, sobbing out her pain and fury. Once upon a time the sound of my fated mate so distraught would have brought me to my knees, now it only fills me with satisfaction.

I should have thrown her out of my life years ago. In fact, I never should have started at relationship with her in the first place. Of course, I wasn't strong enough at the time – but I'm strong enough now I have to be, for my pack, for Ella and Rafe, even for Roger.

I want to go straight home to Ella, but I know I need to work off some of this violent energy first. I take my guards to the forest, shifting the moment I'm out of the car, and leading them. on a run through the dense woodland. I don't hold back, sprinting at top speed and leaving my men in the dust. I run until the flames of my fury are finally banked, only turning back once. my wolf is calm enough to think of Lydia without growling

I decide to work from home for the rest of the day, and I finally make my way back to Ella. When I arrive home, she's sound asleep in my bed, curled up in a little ball beneath the covers. At first I think the round lump in the bedding is one of her pillows, but when I notice it breathing I realize that the precious human has burrowed into a cocoon of cotton and goose- down. Unable to resist, I lift the duvet to peek inside, leaning down to kiss her hair when I see her serene expression.

Afterwards I head for the shower, still sweaty from my run. I sigh as the steaming water envelopes me, telling myself that I have to go back to work after I'm clean, no matter how badly I want to crawl into bed with Ella and nap the afternoon away.

Just for a little while? My wolf begs. Five minutes?

You know it's never just five minutes. I grouse. Five minutes turns into fifteen, and that turns into an hour. Besides, Ella needs her rest. I'll probably wake her if I try to join.

But we promised to update her about Lydia. He reminds me, determined to win the argument. And we will. I promise, when she wakes up in her own time.

And so I force myself to dress and go to my study, promising myself I'll come check on Ella. again in a few hours. In the end, however, she ends up finding me. Around three I hear small

door. feet padding down the hall, and then a soft knock on my

I cross the room in an instant, swinging it open and looking down at the beautiful human with a furrowed brow. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I'm allowed two twenty minute walks, remember?" She remarks pointedly. "Besides I wanted a snack and when I asked my guard he told me you were home."

"Mhmm, and how did you get down the stairs?" I inquire, brushing a few locks of hair back from her upturned face.

"Marcus carried me." Ella declares, gesturing to the guard still trailing after her. "What happened with Lydia?"

I glance at the guard in question, telling my wolf we can't be annoyed with the man for

following our orders not to let Ella near any staircases, just because we don't like the fact that he touched her. "Let's go to the kitchen and find you a snack, then we can talk." I suggest, scooping Ella up.

"Dominic, I want to walk." She groans. "I've been stuck in bed all day."

"But there are more stairs." I object, secretly thankful for this fact. I know the poor thing must be getting stir crazy, but I haven't gotten to hold her since this morning, and I've missed her even after this short time apart.

"Fine but I'm standing when we get there." Ella declares stubbornly.

"As long as you stand next to me, that's fine by me." I answer, hugging her close as I navigate the corridors. "Did you have a nice nap?"

"It was fine, what happened with Lydia?" Ella presses,

"So impatient." I cluck, striding into the kitchen and setting her feet on the ground. "Food comes first. What were you craving?"

Ella squares her shoulders, crossing her arms over her chest and tilting her chin up defiantly." Dominic Sinclair, I am not telling you anything or eating a bite until you tell me what happened."

I arch one brow, towering over her and giving her my most disapproving look. Ella glares up at me for a few moments, but finally caves when I emit a low rumble. "Fine," she huffs, going to the fridge. She extracts a bag of baby carrots and some of my chef's homemade hummus, pointedly opening the container and dipping one of the orange batons into the rich puree and popping it into her mouth. She chews and swallows, then says, "there, happy?"

"Not yet." I murmur, taking a seat at the counter and pulling her to stand between my legs. My wolf relaxes as soon as she's in the protective circle of my reach, knowing we can catch her if she starts to feel faint. I dip another carrot and hold it to her lips, determined to feed her at minimum of five before finally agreeing to share the latest developments. Ella obediently munches the morsels, and I can tell that she was hungrier than she'd been willing to admit. Her grumpy energy gradually diminishes, until she's eagerly waiting for the next bite. A bit later, I finally announce the news. "Lydia isn't pregnant."

Chapter 100 – Lydia Gets Desperate

3rd Person

Sinclair watched Ella like a hawk as his words landed. A riot of emotions flashed across her beautiful features, first relief, then happiness and finally worry and confusion. “We didn’t even sleep together.” He continued soberly. “She tried, but apparently I wasn’t interested – even drugged.”

“Oh.” The same progression of tangled feelings flitted across Ella’s expression, one which the Alpha understood only too well. He didn’t want a child with Lydia either, and he was beyond relieved he hadn’t actually been intimate with the conniving she-wolf – but there was no denying it would have solved a number of their problems. “So, we’re right back where we started, then.” Ella assessed softly.

“Yes, but I can still try to find another Luna.” Sinclair assured her. “I know it will take longer now, but it’s better this way. Lydia isn’t the mother I want for one of my pups, and she’s definitely not the woman I want for my queen.”

“I know.” Ella replied, leaning into his warmth. “I didn’t want her in our lives either, I’m just ... overwhelmed.”

“I know,” Sinclair sympathized, tucking her against his broad chest. “I’m going to find a way to make it better, Ella. I promise.”

“You better.” She grumbled, snuggling closer and breathing in his scent. As his comforting aroma filled her senses, she closed her eyes and sighed with pleasure, suddenly feeling the strangest compulsion to bite the big wolf. It was almost as if she wanted to mark him again, now that her scent had washed off in the shower now that she knew Lydia hadn’t succeeded. in her efforts to steal him.

Ella nuzzled Sinclair’s pec, nudging his shirt aside and hesitantly parting her lips. She experimentally pressed her teeth into his flesh, but before she could give in to the instinct completely, Sinclair tangled one large fist in her hair and formed a handhold, pulling her head back.

“You bite me, I bite you back, baby.” He purred, looking as though he didn’t have any problem with this idea at all.

Something deep in Ella’s bones melted at this thought, writhing with defiance and lust, eager to make him do just that. However her well-honed instincts for self-preservation forced down those strange feelings, and she blushed. “Sorry, I don’t know what came over me.”

“I do.” Sinclair rumbled, moving his free hand to the curve of her belly. The baby kicked,

as if confirming his guilt for influencing his mother's wolfish behavior. "But we have more to talk about, I promised I'd tell you about the driver from the accident."

Ella's dilated pupils sharpened then, as reason returned to her brain. "What did you find out?"

"He was hired by the Prince." Sinclair explained, "No surprise there. He was only supposed to be doing recon, but he also had orders to kill you if he saw an opening to do so."

"So when I walked into the street near his car..." Ella reasoned, piecing together this information with her memories.

"Exactly." Sinclair confirmed. "He thought it was the perfect opportunity."

"Did he know anything else about the Prince's plans?" Ella questioned, any hint of her earlier mischief gone now.

"He was supposed to be on the team of rogues the Prince hired for the attack Roger warned us about." Sinclair shared, offering Ella another carrot.

She took it, but frowned. "Why haven't we heard anything more about that? My bed rest isn't public knowledge, is it?"

"No." Sinclair confirmed, "but Roger said it would be a few weeks. The invitation could come any day now. Of course, now we have a valid excuse to refuse it."

"But do we want people to know I'm on bed rest?" Ella asked, worry obvious in her voice.

"I think it's our best option. No one will question your absence from the event, and I've already increased security here threefold. This house is basically a fortress at this point." Sinclair assured her.

"Well I suppose that deals with the Prince for the time being, but what about Lydia? What if she tries something else?" Ella wondered aloud.

"Lydia isn't going to be a problem anymore." Sinclair proclaimed. "I exiled her, and if she wants to live, she'll leave Moon Valley, and never come back."

Across town, Lydia was fuming.

She'd been striving to become queen since she was a child. Her parents always told her she was meant for great things, so it hadn't been hard to convince them to bring her to Moon Valley as a teenager. She'd sidled up to Henry Sinclair's presumed heir, only to

suffer the severe bad luck of choosing the wrong brother twice.

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It hadn't been easy to resist her fated mate, but she was never going to settle for a second son. Then, when Henry named Dominic his heir instead of Roger, she thought that the Goddess must have been right after all. Lydia dumped Roger and happily gave herself to Dominic, only to suffer one misfortune after another.

First Henry had been attacked in the middle of his campaign, preventing her from becoming a Princess. Then she hadn't been able to conceive an heir, which meant Sinclair would never get elected as King on his own merit. She'd blamed him for their infertility and decided to try and move on to greener pastures, but her new husband hadn't been amused when she couldn't give him an heir either.

At last Lydia thought her problems were solved when Sinclair found that little whore to be his surrogate, but for some reason she hadn't been able to waltz back into his life as if nothing had changed. He'd seemed genuinely angry about her departure, even though it's what any rational woman would have done in her shoes. She'd experience a quick flash of hope when she realized that his sperm was fertile after all, but then he'd ruined her plan to steal it.

Everything had fallen apart, and Lydia was sick of watching all her dreams slip away. She had to do something desperate times called for desperate measures, and she had to find a way to claim her rightful place in society without letting Sinclair know she hadn't left town.

Her first thought was to kill Ella, but without his heir, Sinclair wouldn't be King. Her second

thought was to wait until the baby was born and then kill the infuriatingly beautiful she-wolf, but after his reaction that afternoon, Lydia had a sneaking suspicion the Alpha wouldn't take too kindly to the bitch's murder.

In the end, she realized there was only one thing to do. Sinclair wasn't going to take her back, but he wasn't the only wolf in the running to rule the Kingdom. The Prince already had an heir, and though he also had a mate, he didn't seem nearly as attached to her as Sinclair was to Ella. Besides, if Lydia played her cards right, he wouldn't ever know that she had anything to do with the Princess's untimely passing.

Yes, Lydia decided. With the Princess out of the way, the road would be clear for her to swoop in and take her place. She could tell the Prince all of Sinclair's weak spots, and help him win the election. Together they could rule the realm and lead the united packs into a whole new era. The Prince's ideology was much more in line with Lydia's anyway.

She and Sinclair had never really seen eye to eye about things like charity or free speech.

The hard part was figuring out how to get to the Princess when she was frequently surrounded by guards. However, Lydia's experiences with Ella ended up helping there too. She remembered how easy it had been to approach the other she-wolf in the women's restroom where male guards couldn't follow.

Lydia scoured the internet for news about the Princess's planned campaign events and outings in the coming week, eventually discovering that she was going to be the guest of honor at a ribbon cutting for a new primary school in two days time. She spent the better part of the first day trying to figure out how she should go about taking the other woman's life, knowing it would be best if she could find a poison or something with a delayed effect. It would be much easier to get away with the crime if she wasn't present when the Princess actually took her last breath.

Finally Lydia settled on an aerosol toxin which she could hide in a perfume bottle, especially since everyone knew the reigning Luna's signature scent. The Princess had been a model before marrying the Prince, and she starred in multiple beauty ads to this day, but none of which were so famous as her Moonkissed fragrance ads. The perfume was the best selling scent in the realm because of her endorsement.

Thankfully Lydia had the foresight to have the poison she ordered online shipped to a random address, arriving to intercept the overnight delivery before it ever reached the actual resident. From there it was smooth sailing. She bought a fresh bottle of Moonkissed, emptied the contents and replaced it with her toxin. She went to the ribbon cutting and laid in wait in the bathroom, then accidentally crashed into the Princess when she entered, ensuring the Luna dropped her bag.

The contents spilled out over the floor, and then it was a simple slide of hand to switch the perfume bottles. Lydia left immediately afterwards, then waited for the news to break. It took all of 24 hours, until the next time the Princess applied her perfume right in the safety of the Royal Palace. Her death was instantaneous and for once, at long last, Lydia's plans actually paid off. There were no hiccups or unintended consequences, no unfortunate turns of fate. The Princess died just like she was supposed to, and Lydia's path to the Prince was clear. Now all that was left to do was make sure Sinclair lost the election then her future would

finally be secure.

Chapter 101 – The Princess is Dead

Ella

Once it became clear that Lydia wasn't going to be the solution to our problems, I decided it was time to call in some backup. I trust Sinclair to take finding a new Luna seriously, but I also know he doesn't have the time. Between running the pack, the campaign, and taking care of me, there's no room in his life to go out hunting for a mate. I, on the other hand, have nothing but time. Bed rest sounds like a nice, relaxing time, but all it really means is that the world is falling apart around me and I'm not allowed to do anything but lie around and get fat.

So I invite Roger and Henry over for a visit, with two main objectives in mind. First, it's long past time that I come clean to Sinclair's father about my true identity. Second, if anyone can be trusted to help me wingwoman the father of my child, it's his father and his brother.

I persuade one of my faithful guards to carry me downstairs just before lunchtime, settling in the main sitting room in anticipation of my visitors. Roger and Henry arrive shortly afterwards, walking or in Henry's case, wheeling in with wide smiles on their faces. I start to get up, but they both immediately protest. "No, don't move, we'll come to you." Roger promises.

"Poor darling," Henry commiserates beside him, "we ought to get you some wheels so you can be mobile even on bed rest."

I hug them both, laughing at Henry's suggestion. "I'd like that, but somehow I think your son would think it's too much excitement."

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"You may have a point there." The older man concedes with a knowing look, "I do lead a very exciting life rolling around an empty house all day, just waiting for my friends to retire so I can have a social life outside of evening poker games."

"Henry!" I exclaim, sitting up in excitement. "I can't believe I didn't think of this before – if we're both stuck at home all day, we might as well spend the time together! I need company, you need company, and Sinclair would probably love the idea of me having another babysitter

the bossy bastard."

Roger laughs, and Henry is smiling, but it's a hesitant look, as if he doesn't want to get his hopes up. "Oh now, I'm sure you don't want to spend all day long with an old man."

“Henry, I would love to spend more time with you I mean, full disclosure: I’m so bored and restless that I’d probably take the company of a serial killer about now, but you are a much more preferable alternative.” I declare wryly.

They both chuckle, “You hear that dad? You beat out the homicidal maniacs!” Roger congratulates him.

Henry is looking less uncertain now, and his smile is verging on a beam. “Really?”

“Of course!” I insist, only hesitating when I remember the reason I’ve asked him over today. “That is... assuming you want to spend time with me.”

“Ella, of course I want to! How could you think I wouldn’t want to get to know my new daughter better? Don’t you know fathers exist to spoil their pups and grandpups?” Henry offers gamely. The smile slips from my face at his words, and suddenly I’m fighting back tears. Henry looks confused for a moment, before a guilty expression identical to the one

Sinclair sometimes dons takes over his features. “Oh Ella, I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, it’s not that.” I sniffle, knowing he assumes I’m hurt because I’m an orphan and don’t have any experience with fathers. “It’s just that... no one’s ever wanted to claim me as their child before, and you just did it like it was the most natural thing in the world.”

“Ella that’s a good thing.” Roger offers gently, reaching out to squeeze my hand.

“No,” I argue, shaking my head and burying my face in my hands. “I don’t deserve your kindness. I’ve been lying to you, we both have.”

Henry wheels forward, resting his palm on my shoulder. “Oh now, come on dearheart, I’m sure it’s not all that bad.”

“But it is! He knows!” I exclaim, gesturing to Roger and crying, “I’m a fraud!”

Roger’s eyes widen with alarm, clearly baffled by my sudden outburst of emotion, and completely out of his depth. Henry, on the other hand, rolls his eyes at his son and wraps his arms around me, encouraging me to lean my head on his shoulder. I surrender, leaning into him and letting his shirt collar soak up my hopeless tears.

“There now,” Henry murmurs, patting my hair, “why don’t you tell me what all this is about.” Little by little the story pours out of me, in between hiccups and sobs with small assists from Roger along the way. “There, you see?” I moan when it’s all over. “It’s all been a lie.” Of course, Henry is too much like his son to let me wallow in my misery. He continues fussing over me and rubbing my back, and for the first time in my life, I feel the way I can only imagine it feels to be held by a parent – by a father. Of course, this only

makes me cry harder.” Poor little mother, it’s no wonder you’re under so much stress. You’ve been making yourself sick over all this haven’t you?”

“Uh-huh,” I nod pitifully. “And I haven’t even told you about Lydia yet.”

When I get through the most recent chapter of our saga, they’re both swearing, and I can barely catch my breath. “That’s why I asked you both over today, I wanted you to help me find a Luna for Dominic, since he doesn’t have the time to search for himself... that is, assuming you can still stand the sight of me.”

“Ella, you listen to me now.” Henry instructs, sounding more stern than I’ve ever heard him. “You’re going to be my daughter whether you marry my son or not and it doesn’t matter one bit that you’re human. You’re giving me a grandpup, and that makes you family forever.”

I pull away from him slightly, tears streaming down my cheeks, “you mean you don’t hate me?”

“Of course not!” He admonishes. “I couldn’t if I tried. You didn’t ask for any of this to happen, Ella. You’re just doing the best you can and for what it’s worth, your best has been phenomenal.”

“He’s right, Ella” Roger agrees “You’re doing incredible. And of course we’ll help you find a Luna for Sinclair’

“Really?” I squeak

“Of course “Roger begins, “we’ll do whatever we can to help, even ”

Before he can finish his sentence, one of the guards walls in, an anxious look on his face. “I’m

sorry, but you need to see this.” He picks up the television remote from the coffee table, pressing a button that opens a sliding panel above the fireplace and reveals a big screen TV. The screen flickers to life, and the guard quickly switches the channel to the leading shifter news station.

A picture of the Prince and his wife is dominating the screen, with a bold headline reading: Princess Found Dead in the Royal Palace.

The reporter is speaking in a low even tone, reporting on the brief details available at this early stage. “The Princess was found unresponsive in her bathroom earlier this morning, after she failed to appear for a scheduled campaign event. Her cause of death has not yet been identified, but an autopsy will be conducted to determine whether or not foul

play was involved. The Palace has not released an official statement about her passing, other than to request time for the Royal Family to grieve this tragedy in private.”

“Well I guess that solves the problem of the women’s event and the rogue attack.” Roger observes dryly.

“I... what does this mean?” I ask, my voice still husky from all the crying.

“It’s not good.” Henry answers gruffly. “He just went from an abusive tyrant to a grieving, single father.”

“So... even though he won’t have a Luna anymore, this could help him in the campaign?” I surmise, hating that there might be a double standard like this.

“He already has his heir and a spare.” Roger reminds me. “That ensures his wolf is well grounded and balanced even if he doesn’t have a mate.”

“But I thought Lunas were supposed to lead the she-wolves of a pack, won’t he need one eventually?” I inquire.

“Not necessarily.” Henry frowns. “It’s different with you and Dominic, because as long as the mother of his pup is alive, she’ll be expected to lead unless we find someone to take your place. But the pack won’t fault the Prince for being a widower.”

“So basically you’re telling me that as bad as things already were... they just got worse?” I assess.

“Yes, Ella.” Henry confirms gravely. “I’m afraid so.”

Chapter 102 – Sinclair Gets a Scolding

Ella

Sinclair calls soon after the news about the Princess breaks, explaining that he'll probably be stuck at the office until late this evening as a result. He was relieved to hear that Henry and Roger were at the house with me, and made me promise to call him if I need anything.

The three of us spent the afternoon discussing ideal qualities to look for in a potential second- chance mate for Sinclair, which proved surprisingly difficult. Apparently Sinclair had a few serious girlfriends in high school before Lydia came along, then a few more who were more akin to distractions while she continued to date Roger. There hasn't been anyone since they divorced, which is why he apparently always got photographed with different women – because he never wanted to lead anyone on with second dates when he knew it wasn't going to go anywhere.

Combined, this meant that his only serious interests amounted to boyhood dalliances, his evil fated mate, and me a human he can't ever be with. Try making a dating profile out of that. I wish there was some way I could just become a wolf. I think, standing in front of the bathroom mirror and staring at my reflection, just because it's an excuse to be on my feet. In horror movies all werewolves have to do is bite a human, then they're changed forever. I know all that isn't real, but part of me still wishes it could be.

I'd love to transform. My inner voice agrees wistfully. To be free to lope through the forest under the full moon.

Can you imagine what it would feel like to be so powerful? I reply, relieved that we're on the same page

for once. I've never felt powerful in my life. It would be nice to know what that's like... at least once.

We're powerful in at least one way. My conscience proclaims, ever the optimist when I'm trying to feel down on myself. We made a baby. We're growing Sinclair's pup. If that's not power, what is?

"You okay Ella?" Roger's voice floats through the door, and I push away my thoughts.

Pulling my gaze from my reflection, I swing the door open, eyeing the waiting wolf indignantly. "You know just because I'm on bed rest, it doesn't mean I can't stand up every now and then."

"And if I know my brother, his response would be that stalling and making up reasons to stay upright every time you have an excuse to be on your feet is cheating." Roger

replies, flashing me a grin.

I narrow my eyes at him. That's exactly what Sinclair would say, but whereas Sinclair's scolding has the power to make me shake in my boots, Roger's just irks me. "Well, Dominic isn't here." I remind him, turning my nose up.

"Oh really?" A deep voice sounds from the doorway, and I jolt slightly, turning to find Sinclair watching us with raised brows.

"You're home!" I exclaim, glancing at the clock. It's already ten PM, but I barely noticed how quickly the night passed.

"I am." Sinclair confirms, prowling forward with lethal grace. "And from the sounds of it, not a moment too soon."

11

I willingly melt into his arms when he reaches for me, lifting my feet off the ground as I'm enveloped in a warm hug. "I was only up for a minute." I tell him, breathing in his scent.

Sinclair trails kisses over my hair, "Now why don't I believe you?" He inquires, his amused voice a low rumble in my ear.

"Because you're a suspicious ogre who assumes the worst of people?" I suggest, batting my lashes at him and adopting an innocent tone as I add, "even the mother of

your child." The big Alpha chuckles, "Of course, it has nothing to do with the fact that you're a bundle of pure mischief."

Before I can respond, we're given a much-needed reminder that we aren't alone. "I think it's time for us to go, Roger." Henry observes, eyeing us with a guarded expression. "Dominic, walk us out?"

"Of course." He deposits me on the couch with a warning to stay put until he returns. I know I should do as he says, but at the same time, I'm impossibly curious about what Henry might have to say to Sinclair after our visit today. Is this something about the Princess's death? Is he angry with us for keeping the secret about my identity for so long? Was he merely being kind when he told me he didn't care if I was human?

As stealthily as I can, I rise from the couch and tiptoe to the door, pressing my ear against the wood and straining to hear the hushed conversation in the entryway.

"What news about the Princess?" Roger asks, his voice slightly muffled by the distance and the shuffling of donning shoes and coats.

“Nothing yet, but I don’t think this was some accident. The timing is too suspicious.” Sinclair replies grimly.

“You don’t think the Prince would have hurt her to help his campaign, surely?” Henry inquires, sounding aghast.

“I wouldn’t put anything past him, Goddess knows he’s beaten her bloody more than a few times over the years... but I don’t know. It feels awfully cunning for his miniscule brains.” Sinclair assesses.

“I agree.” Roger confirms. “So far I haven’t seen him come up with anything more creative than hiring thugs to try to take out the competition.”

“Well, we’ll see what the autopsy says, and I’ll try to get some of my own investigators to look into it as well.” Sinclair shares. “How were things here?”

There’s a tense silence, and then Henry’s voice rises, sounding more authoritative than I’ve ever heard it. “Well you have much bigger problems than the Prince.” He bites, “Do you have any idea what this game of yours is doing to that poor girl?”

“Of course I do.” Sinclair replies sharply, his own voice growing harsh. “And it upsets me more than you could imagine.

“What were you thinking, asking her to get involved in our politics?” Henry scolds, sounding furious “And don’t you tell me it was her idea, she thought she was going to lose her baby. Besides, you knew how dangerous this was going to be from the beginning she didn’t!”

“I also know that without her, I would lose the election.” Sinclair growls back. “I know I don’t need to remind you what the Prince will do to her if he wins – he’s already trying to kill them and he’s come damn close a few times without an army behind him. Besides, you’re the one who taught me my duty comes first. I couldn’t very well put one person over the well-being of the entire realm, no matter how much I care about her.”

“If you’d told me the truth we could have found another way – a she-wolf who could fake a relationship and a pregnancy so Ella could stay hidden.” Henry combats, and I’m amazed to realize that he’s taking my side over his own son’s. He’s defending me, even though I’m just some random human. As touched as I am, I also feel a nearly irresistible compulsion to defend Sinclair. I don’t like the fact that Henry is blaming him for all our problems, he already blames himself enough.

Without thinking, I push through the door and join them in the entryway. Henry and Roger blink in surprise, but Sinclair narrows his eyes at me. “You’re getting stealthier by

the day, little one.”

I ignore him, defiantly crossing to stand between him and his father. “I appreciate you standing up for me Henry, but this isn’t all Dominic’s fault. It was my idea, and I wouldn’t take no for an answer. I put myself in this situation with full agency and I don’t regret it.” I continue, looking up at the hulking Alpha behind me. “Yes, I’m stressed and overwhelmed and hormonal, but I’ve survived much worse than this. You have no idea what my life has been, and this is the safest and most secure I’ve ever felt.”

“Ella, you don’t have to do this,” Sinclair tries to say.

“I know that.” I assure him. “And I’m not saying any of this for your sake – I’m saying it because it’s true. I’m an adult, I made my own decision. I know it’s hard to remember that when I’m crying like a baby, but you have to understand that even being free to cry is something I’ve never had before. I’ve always had to do everything myself, I never had the luxury of falling to pieces, I never had anyone to comfort me. It sounds backwards, but the fact that I’m a mess rather than just repressing everything is progress. It’s a good thing, and that’s all down to you, Dominic.”

I can see that he’s recalling my behavior after the attacks at the club and the Wild Hunt, that he can sense the truth in my words. He softens slightly, and I hear Henry sigh behind us. “I’m happy to hear that, Ella.” The elder man begins carefully. “You’re right, I didn’t know. But I still don’t like this.”

“None of us like it, Dad.” This time it’s Roger who’s speaking. “But we all have to make the best with what we have, and we can’t go back now. There’s no space for could’ve, should’ve, would’ve. We just have to keep moving forward together.”

Henry nods. “You’re right. I’m sorry I gave you a hard time, Dominic. I know you wouldn’t do anything to hurt Ella or the baby.”

“Thanks Dad.” Dominic leans down to hug him. “I’ll call you tomorrow. For now, my little human and I need to have a talk about the meaning of bed rest.”

“Good luck Ella.” Henry and Roger laugh, exiting the house and leaving me with one very large, very unamused wolf.

“Well, trouble?” Sinclair asks, crossing his arms over his chest. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Chapter 103 – Flirtation

Trigger warning – mention of sexual abuse (not explicit)

Ella

I peek up at Sinclair from beneath my lashes, trying to gauge his frustration level. It's obvious. He's displeased that I defied him, but I can tell he's also glad to be home after what was certainly a very long day. Moreover, I think my words to his father helped assuage some of his guilt, and he's feeling more affectionate towards me than he might have a few minutes ago. "I have to say that I missed you?" I profess, sliding my arms around his neck. "And you're the most handsome man in the whole world?"

Sinclair flashes his fangs, emitting a dark chuckle and swinging my legs up into his arms. "Flirting with me isn't going to get you out of this, sweetheart." He ducks his head and steals a kiss before mounting the stairs up to his room, "though it's very cute to watch you try." "Who said I was just flirting?" I object, leaning my head against his chest, "I really did miss you."

Sinclair doesn't pause as he carts me up to the fifth floor, never breaking a sweat or getting short of breath. The way he acts you'd think I'm as light as a feather – though with his supernatural strength it probably feels that way. "I missed you too." He finally replies, pushing through the bedroom door. "I hate being so far from home when these things strike." "You must have had a really rough afternoon." I observe, studying his drawn features and fatigued demeanor.

Sinclair drops onto the sofa, keeping me in his lap, "Rough is an understatement." He sighs, sounding as though the weight of the world is on his shoulders. Of course, this isn't far from the truth. I snuggle closer to him, wishing there was something I could do to ease the monumental burdens he's shouldering. A contented rumble vibrates in his chest, and Sinclair smiles down at me. "It's getting better by the minute though."

I tilt my face up to his, silently asking for a kiss. He arches a brow and for a moment I'm afraid he'll reject my affection, but I needn't have worried. Sinclair lowers his lips to mine, and my heart begins to race. The moment our lips touch electricity zings through my body, setting my nerve endings alight. It's every bit as thrilling and all-consuming as the first time, and I quickly find myself getting carried away in the experience. Unfortunately it ends much too soon. Sinclair pulls back, leaning his forehead against mine and purring, "You can't distract me with kisses either, little one."

He grimaces, and I know I'm not going to like what he says next. "Besides, kissing is a gateway drug. We've got to try to stop." His arms tightened around me as he spoke, as if his body didn't agree with his words or maybe it was his wolf.

Adopting an innocent expression, I reply. "I have no idea what you mean. A gateway to

what?"

Sinclair laughs, kissing me again even though he just said we shouldn't. This kiss is longer than the first, because just like he said, it's getting harder and harder to stop the longer we continue. My blood heats to a sultry simmer, and wetness pools at my center as Sinclair's lips, teeth and tongue go to work, making me forget that anything exists outside of this moment Goddess, why couldn't you just be a wolf?" He breathes when we part.

A sharp sting punctures my elated mood, bringing me crashing back down to earth. It's a crushing reminder that I'm not enough for him that I'll never be enough no matter what I do. Seeing the hurt painted over my face, Sinclair winces. "Oh Ella, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did." I murmur, trying to keep my voice steady. "And you're right I'm not."

Sinclair is shaking his head, looking miserable. "I didn't mean that I want you to be anything other than what you already are just that it would mean we could actually be together, and I want that more than I can say."

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I nod, fighting back tears as I disentangle myself from his arms, and move to the cushion beside him. "It's okay, Dominic, you don't have to explain."

"I shouldn't have said it." Sinclair insists fiercely, reaching for me as if he wants to pull me back into his lap. He stops himself when I stiffen, seeming to realize I need some space at the moment. "I'm truly sorry, Ella."

I nod again, not meeting his gaze. If I try to talk about this now I'm sure I'll start crying, not to mention I'm still so turned on that I'm finding it difficult to sit still. The last thing I need is for Sinclair to know how excited my body is, when he's just hit me in my weak spot.

Sinclair's nostrils flair, and his eyes begin to glow. I wonder if he's scenting my arousal, but a moment later he's cursing and rising to his feet, "I'm going to go take a shower. You should try to get some rest. We can talk about your bed rest tomorrow."

I watch him retreat into the bathroom, feeling strangely dismayed. Apparently flirting and kisses can't get me out of trouble, but acting like a wounded butterfly can.

That's a good thing, right? It means we got away with it. Despite the statement, the little voice in the back of my mind doesn't sound pleased at all.

I know the feeling. Then why in the Goddess's name am I so disappointed?

3rd Person

Across town, in the hallowed halls of the royal palace, the Prince sat in darkness.

The news of his wife's death had been a blow, but the true outrage had come when he learned the medical examiner's analysis. They hadn't conducted an autopsy yet, but the coroner had immediately declared suspicious circumstances upon seeing the Princess's body. Apparently there was some sort of rash on her skin, and the perfume bottle in her hand made him. some kind of topical poison.

suspect

This was unacceptable. The Prince wasn't an overly sentimental man, but his wife was his. The idea that anyone would have the audacity to lay a hand on the Princess – on his property was an unforgivable offense. He couldn't believe that anyone would dare to do something so brazen, and his rage was spiraling out of control. As soon as he figured out who was responsible for this crime, he was going to make sure they paid in the most painful way possible.

He strode to the window then, glaring out at his city. His wolf was pacing back and forth in his head, positively rabid in grief and fury. She hadn't been his fated mate, but he'd claimed her all the same. And though he certainly had other lovers, the Princess was always his favorite.

As Prince he could do anything he wanted with the she-wolves in his bed – whether they liked it or wanted to be there in the first place. But none of the others responded so perfectly as his wife. It truly was like she was made for him she cried when he wanted her to cry, screamed in exactly the right way to make his blood sing, and she never fought or tried to put on a brave front.

While he stood there, growing hard just thinking about the way she'd begged him for the last time they were together, a shaft of light abruptly reflected in the window. The door mercy was opening behind him, and a woman's silhouette appeared in the frame.

It took a moment for him to recognize Lydia, but once he did, he growled, "How did you get in here? I told my guards I wasn't to be disturbed."

"I have my ways." Lydia shrugged, striding into the dim study.

"What do you want?" The Prince demanded.

"I wanted to offer my help." Lydia replied, taking on a gentle tone that didn't suit her in

the least. "I know what it's like to have someone taken from me."

"Then you ought to know it's too soon for you to be here." The Prince growled. "It hasn't even been 12 hours."

"Maybe, but I didn't think you would appreciate me keeping the information I possess to myself." Lydia answered. "Since I know who killed the Princess."

The Prince surged to his feet, "Who?"

"Who else, but Dominic?" Lydia barely refrained from rolling her eyes, remembering who she was speaking to at the last moment.

The Prince paused, not convinced. "Why would he? He has to know this will help my campaign."

"I don't think it's about the campaign." Lydia suggested slyly. "It's payback. You've been trying to kill his mate, haven't you?"

The Prince narrowed his eyes. "How do you know that?"

"Because I'm not an idiot. And neither are you – it's exactly what I would do in your shoes." Lydia shared.

"So you're guessing." The Prince observed. "Are you guessing about Dominic too? How do I know he's actually behind this?"

"Because he threatened to kill me – his own fated mate- over the bitch and I never laid a hand on her." Lydia explained.

"But why her, why not come after me directly?" The Prince demanded, admitting to himself that few other people would have the motive to target his wife, even if he didn't understand the bigger picture yet.

"He won't risk the election. He thinks that if he steals the throne by force the Alpha Council will unseat him the way they're unseating your father." Lydia related.

The Prince snorted, Sinclair and his father were one in the same. They wanted the power, but they weren't willing to do what was necessary to keep it. "And how do you expect to help me?" He grouched, eyeing Lydia curiously.

"I know things about Dominic and the Sinclair family. I know their secrets, I know their weak spots I know how they think. And I'll tell you everything for a price."

“And what price is that?” The Prince inquired.

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“Protection.” Lydia stated simply, deciding that it truly was too soon to suggest he take her as his replacement Luna. All that would come in time, right now she just needed to get her foot in the door. “If you keep me safe, I’ll make sure you win this election.”

The Prince nodded, “You have a deal.”

Chapter 104 – Three Little Words

Ella

“Ella, I love you, but you’re driving me crazy.” My sister’s voice floats through my phone, sounding more exasperated than irritated. After his shower, Sinclair went to his office, and I promptly called my sister for advice.

“What do you mean?” I inquire hesitantly, I’ve just finished explaining

“I mean,” She sighs heavily, “Who are you, and what have you done with my sister? You’ve always known exactly what you wanted and done whatever was necessary to make it happen. You are a strong, independent woman not some bratty, indecisive, emotional basket-case who’s too caught up in a man to know her own heart.” She groans.

I wish I could argue with her assessment of my behavior, but I know she’s right. However, before I can acknowledge as much, she continues, “It’s like: you like Sinclair, you don’t like Sinclair. You want to be with him one moment, and the next you’re trying to foist him off on another woman – just make up your mind! I swear, I don’t even recognize you anymore!”

“Can’t you see that’s the problem! I don’t even recognize myself anymore.” I exclaim, rubbing my sore neck. “My entire life has been turned upside down -”

“I know! Because that’s all you ever talk about anymore.” She bursts, interrupting me. “Do you have any idea when you last asked me about my life? That you showed interest in anything other than your own problems?”

Her words sting, and I realize she’s right. I have been so wrapped up in my own drama that I’ve been neglecting my sister. I hate to think it, but the truth is I don’t have any idea what’s going on with her. “I’m sorry, Cora. What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing, but it would be nice to know you care!” She snaps, sounding more than a little petulant.

And she had the nerve to call us bratty! The little voice in my head observes.

“Are you serious?” I hiss. “People are trying to kill me, Cora. A psychotic bitch drugged and attempted to rape the father of my child. I’m committing a fraud of epic proportions in order to save an entire fucking species from civil war. And you’re pissed because for the first time in our entire lives, I’m not ignoring my own needs to take care of yours?”

“I never asked you to do that!” Cora argues, “you made that choice all on your own.”

“Because I had to!” I growl. “I had to be the strong one because you always fell apart at the first sign of trouble.”

“Then maybe you should have let me fall apart!” Cora counters defensively, “maybe if you had, I would have learned to stand on my own rather than relying on you.”

Nausea seizes my stomach, and I clench my eyes shut. “You know what I went through in order to protect you.” I finally say, my voice hoarse. “Do you really wish that I hadn’t? Was I supposed to stand by and let my sister be abused?”

A shaky breath vibrates against the receiver, and Cora’s voice is small when she speaks again. You know that isn’t what I meant... but I have to live with the guilt of knowing you were hurt because of me. And sometimes I just think that maybe... maybe if you hadn’t protected me

I

then at least we would have been in it together, rather than you being all alone.”

“And I would have never forgiven myself if I had.” I share, even as a wave of sorrow swells inside me to learn how she struggles with guilt. “Why haven’t you ever said this to me before?”

“Because you’ve never been willing to talk about it.” Cora scoffs. “I suppose that’s one thing I can thank Dominic for. Trust a bossy wolf to make you finally unlock your emotions.”

“He really did.” I acknowledge wryly. “I think maybe that’s why this is all so hard for me. I feel so... raw. I don’t think I’ve ever been so emotionally vulnerable, and I don’t have the first clue how to cope.”

“I can tell.” She laughs. “And it’s not your fault that you never learned how to handle feelings Ella, but you also have to take responsibility for learning now that you recognize the problem. You do realize this is why you’re having so many issues with Dominic, right?”

“No, it’s that our situation is insane.” I object pointedly. “It’s not like this isn’t the first time I’ve been in love.”

Oh my goddess, I think belatedly. I’m in love. I admitted that I was falling for Sinclair a while ago, but this is the first time I’ve been able to acknowledge that I passed the point of no return

even to myself. I’m not just falling, I’m completely in love with Sinclair, and avoiding a

relationship with him isn't going to change that.

"I swear El, if you call your relationship with that little weasel love, I will come over there and smack you right in that beautiful face of yours." Cora threatens, completely serious.

"Hey, I know it wasn't great in the end, but it's not like it started out that way." I defend, wondering if I'm being honest even as I say the words. "I did love him."

"Ella, let me ask you something. Did you ever feel even a fraction of what you feel for Dominic, for Mike?" She inquires.

pause. It's been so long since I even thought of Mike, and I've been in such deep denial about. Sinclair that I haven't even considered comparing my feelings for the men. As soon as I think back on the relationship, I see the truth glaring back at me, "No." I exhale sadly. "Never." "And why do you think you believed you were in love with him for all those years?" She presses. "Why do you think you let him treat you so terribly?"

I grimace. "Because I didn't have the first idea what a healthy relationship looked like?" I suggest.

"Bingo." She agrees. "That little shit preyed on you from day one we were just too young and inexperienced to realize it at the time." She has the grace not to say "I told you so." The fact is that Cora tried to warn me about Mike more than once over the years, but I was too stubborn to listen to her. Instead she continues, "I wish I could go back in time and kick him in the balls before he could ever introduce himself to you."

"Me too." I chuckle, shaking my head.

"Now the real question is: What are you going to do about Dominic, now that you've figured all this out?" Cora asks sternly.

"What can I do?" I question, feeling very overwhelmed all of a sudden. "I mean, so what if I do love him? So what if my baggage is causing all these mixed-up feelings? That doesn't change

the situation we're in. I can't make myself a wolf, and I can't make him a human or non-alpha I probably wouldn't even if I could, because then he wouldn't be the same man I fell for."

"Are you sure you're not just trying to protect yourself from getting hurt?" Cora questions. "I mean I know you're in hot water with the campaign and everything, but is it possible those are just excuses?"

The gravity of our circumstances looms above me, and I know that we made the right

decision. Even so, I'm woman enough to admit that my sister isn't wrong. "I think it's both." I murmur sadly. "I have been afraid, and I haven't trusted him. But Dominic and I don't have the luxury of being selfish we're going to be parents, he's going to be a king. Our responsibility is to the pack and our baby not our feeling:

"That's fair." Cora concedes. "But is knowing that enough to help you move forward and stop torturing yourself?"

"I don't know." I moan. "It just feels so unfinished. We never even talked about our feelings... I mean, he tried and I..."

"Ran away?" Cora surmises. I hum in confirmation, and her voice takes on a sympathetic note. "I'm afraid if you don't make peace with the decision, you're going to keep being confused and indecisive, El. You need closure."

"I wish there was some way for me to get it without making things worse." I agree. "I mean if I tell him, knowing Dominic he'll go all wolfy on me and insist we can find a way to make it work... assuming he even loves me back."

"Hey, he's not the one that's been avoiding this." Cora reminds me. "At the minimum you know he wants you. And I wouldn't discredit him without even giving him a chance to prove. you wrong, Ella. You're making excuses again."

"Maybe." I sigh.

"Maybe definitely." She snorts.

Suddenly, as if a lightbulb goes off in my head, I realize there might be a way for us to steal a night together. "Cora, I just remembered! Wolves can meet in their dreams. I accidentally called Dominic to me once. Maybe if I can figure out how to do it again, I can tell him and we can be together without complicating reality."

"That's amazing!" She exclaims, "Do you think you can figure it out?" "I don't know, but I'm certainly going to try."

Chapter 105 – Dream Shift

Ella

As I start to doze, I force my brain to think of nothing but Sinclair, willing myself to dream of him. I don't let my mind focus on anything else or get distracted, I just keep telling myself to call Sinclair, to make him come to me.

Darkness closes in, and then I'm back on that bed in the forest. Yes! I think, this is where we were last time! It worked!

It takes a few minutes for Sinclair to appear, but I tell myself to just be patient. He wasn't asleep yet in the real world. I have to wait for him to rest to see him this way.

I'm not sure how much time actually passes, but eventually he comes stalking through the trees. He's in his wolf form this time, but he shifts when he reaches the bed, giving me a tender smile. "Hello trouble."

"Hi." I answer, feeling suddenly shy. "I wasn't sure this would work."

"You mean you meant to call me this time?" He inquires, arching a brow.

I nod, feeling a hot flush work up my cheeks. "I want to tell you something."

"Okay." Sinclair replies, coming to sit on the plush duvet, but not reaching for me the way he usually does. A moment of doubt plagues my heart, but I'm sure he's just trying to use

restraint.

I'm fidgeting, and staring at my hands in my lap, but I slowly work up the courage to speak." I know I've been all over the place lately, and I wish I could tell you that it was all the pregnancy, or all the stress of our situation... but the truth is that it's a lot more than that. Those things are making all this more difficult, but I would have been a mess anyway."

Taking a deep breath, I continue, "You know I was orphaned, and that I never really got a childhood as a result. But I also never experienced love from anyone but Cora. I was so starved for it, that I basically jumped at the first chance I had. I spent years just trying to get over my fear of men, and in hindsight, I'm not sure I ever really did. I think maybe I just got so desperate for some affection that I simply closed my eyes and leapt, and of course the person who caught me was Mike. I was a perfect mark for him young, naive, and willing to do anything to finally feel wanted. I had no idea what a healthy relationship was, and he groomed me to believe that everything he did and said to me was normal."

Sinclair is frowning deeply, and I can see questions weighing on his tongue, but he holds them back. "Of course, I eventually wised up... and then I met you." I share, my voice suddenly very small. "And my heart trusted you even though my brain screamed at me not to. Everything I've experienced in my life conditioned me to believe that if I let myself be vulnerable with you you would break me. It taught me to believe I wasn't worth love, so anyone showing me kindness must be out to trick me. So I tried to convince myself that what I've been feeling with you wasn't real. And at the same time, all those parts of me that I kept buried for so long burst out because my body somehow knew you wouldn't hurt me if I acted like a child, or broke down and let you see my sadness and anger. It knew you wouldn't use those things as weapons against me."

"You've been so patient and accepting. You've taken care of me like no one ever has even

when I hate you for it. But I still couldn't tell you." There are tears in my eyes now, and I can see Sinclair's closed fists trembling with barely held restraint. His wolf is still glowing in his eyes, and I know how hard he's trying to let me simply speak my fill without interruption. I've been a coward. I've been hiding behind the challenges facing us, using them as excuses to avoid ever having to be brave... Even when you've tried to tell me your own feelings, my brain just defaulted to defending myself. I knew if you told me, I wouldn't be strong enough to

resist."

And I know nothing has changed and that a relationship is still impossible for us... but I don't want to be a coward anymore. I want to be brave just once in my life." I take a deep breath as I continue, "So I thought that if I could tell you here... that if we could be together in our dreams, then maybe it wouldn't hurt so badly that we can't be together in real life." I explain, tears spilling down my cheeks.

"I'm... I'm in love with you, Dominic." I whisper, too timid to look him in the eye.

There's a pregnant pause filled with the sound of my pounding heart and my blood rushing in my ears. Then Sinclair's hand is reaching towards me. He catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger, pulling my gaze up to his. I sob when I see the expression on his face. His eyes are shining not with his wolf – but with tears. There's so much affection and understanding on his rugged features, that I feel like he's wrapped me in a hug without even touching me. "I love you, Ella. I think I've been in love with you from the moment your stomped your tiny foot on me. You have no idea how hard it's been to hold my wolf back." "Really?" I sniffle, because even though I was expecting him to tell me he had feelings, I wasn't prepared for love. I certainly wasn't prepared to hear that his wolf wanted me too. My stubborn mind is still amazed the man could be interested in me, let alone his inner animal. "Really." He confirms firmly, "and if you don't

get over here and into my arms this instant, I'm going to let my wolf out so he can pounce on you."

Something inside of me perks up at this thought. I remember all Sinclair's warnings not to run from him at the Wild Hunt, and I remember how thrilling it had been to be chased... until everything went wrong. I think we need a do over. The voice in my head suggests slyly. And I can't help but agree.

I think Sinclair can sense my mischief, because his eyes narrow at me with suspicion as I lean towards him on the bed. Luckily, while he might sense I'm up to something, he doesn't realize what. At first I worry he might reach for me before I can jump onto the ground, but when I change direction at the last moment, he's not quite fast enough to catch me. I immediately break into a sprint, and at first I hear the low rumble of Sinclair's laughter. A moment later, however, I hear his wolf's howl, and I know the hunt is on.

As I start to run, I feel the same intoxicating exhilaration that consumed me at the Wild Hunt. My legs stretch as far and fast as I can make them move, and I'm amazed at how much ground I begin to cover. The night wind whips through my hair as I dash through the trees, an ecstatic smile stretching across my features as my feet crash into the snow.

Somehow I'm not the least bit bothered by the cold, and when Sinclair's howl shatters the night, it's all I can do to stay on my feet. I stop and shudder every time he does it, but it only drives me to run faster and farther to force him to prove himself by catching me.

I don't know where these instincts came from, and while I might not be able to explain them, there's no denying how right this feels. Why have I never run barefoot through the woods

before? Why have I never bathed in the light of the moon? Every second I spend in this wonderful wilderness makes me feel as though I've been living in the wrong skin my entire life-like a piece of my soul has been returned even though I never realized it was missing.

I'm so caught up in the race that I don't even notice when my body begins to blur around the edges. My bones quake, my soul soars, and suddenly everything changes. A starburst of white light consumes me, and for a moment I'm blinded by its brilliance. When my feet hit the ground again, there are four, and I seem much lower to the ground. I look down in shock, amazed to discover fur covered paws where my hands used to be. I glance behind me to discover a bushy, white tipped tail swinging behind me, helping me maintain my balance as I speed through the darkness.

I'm a wolf.

I don't let the change slow me down. This is a dream after all of course magical things

are possible. I can move so much faster on four legs, and if I still had the ability to laugh aloud I'm sure I'd be overflowing with euphoric giggles. Instead I howl gleefully into the chill air, leaping over the fallen branches and rocks dotting the forest floor. I'm free, I'm free!!! The voice in my head cries, loping gracefully through the wintry landscape, determined to never stop.

A deep, familiar howl sends me stumbling. I was so thrilled to transform that I almost forgot about Sinclair. I suppose my own howl tipped him off. It wasn't meant to – I was only celebrating. My conscience pouts.

I know, but now he's onto us. I think quickly. We have to move.

I don't know why it's so important that I don't let Sinclair catch me, but right now the only thought in my head is to get away. I have to make it as difficult for him as possible... for some reason. That's no problem, my inner voice brags, now that I'm free he'll have his work cut out for him. He might be big, but I'm fast.

Then let's go! I insist, spurring her on. Within seconds we're galloping through the snow, even faster than before. Somewhere in the back of my mind it occurs to me to cover my tracks, but I realize Sinclair will be following my scent anyway. It's hard for me to focus on him as distracting as he usually is my heart is soaring and for once it has nothing to do with the Alpha. I can't believe I thought I'd felt free on the night of the hunt. I'm beginning to realize I didn't even know the meaning of the word until now.

My paws, paws, can you believe it!? splash through the ice of a frozen creek, but I carry on without a care in the world. After all, wolves don't have to worry about silly things like frostbite I even have fur between my toes!

I can hear everything too! I can hear the distant pounding of Sinclair's feet, the low calls of owls flying overhead, and even mice and rabbits burrowing in the ground beneath my feet, with all their clicks and tiny squeaks. Then there are the smells who knew water had a smell! Sinclair's smell is more familiar, but it's doing things to this form which are nothing short of scandalous. The stronger it becomes, the more my insides seem to turn to mush, and wetness pools between my legs.

Too late, I realize why his scent has grown so strong.

He's caught up. One moment I'm flying through the night like a wild thing, the next I'm skidding to a stop when he bursts out of the trees ahead of me I what! How did you do that? I demand

To my amazement, his own voice rings in my head, Because, sweet Ella, I'm a hunter. I know how to drive my prey into a trap without them knowing. Besides, He adds, his deep rumble softening with affection, You were too caught up reveling in the fact that water

has a smell to notice.

How do you know that? I inquire suspiciously, not sure how I'm managing to communicate

with him.

You were shouting it at the top of your lungs. He informs me smugly.

Hmph. I narrow my eyes at the cocky Alpha, trying not to think about how powerful he is in this form – how majestic. My body is urging me towards him like we're a pair of magnets, but my wolf isn't ready to give up. We're not done running yet, and if he wants to catch us, he's going to have to do more than stage an ambush. I lunge towards the trees on my left, but Sinclair bounds forward in a single, graceful leap. He's blocking my path, so I try to lunge in the opposite direction. To my fury he manages to block me again.

Glaring at him, I glance at his massive body, realizing that his legs are so long that I could probably slide right beneath him. Pure mischief fills me to the brim, and I pretend to timidly approach him. Sinclair isn't convinced, watching me with the same ravenous hunger he always manages to evoke in his human form.

I've almost reached him when I dive between his legs, sliding on my belly through the snow and thanking the goddess for the slight slope which lets me slip right between his proverbial fingers. Overjoyed with my own brilliance, I rise to take off again, but before I can a huge heavy weight pins me to the ground.

Such a clever little she-wolf. Sinclair's deep voice is all praise, and I can feel his tongue swiping kisses across the back of my neck.

Still, I'm not amused to have him interrupting my fun. I bare my fangs, and scowl at him. over my shoulder, a pint-sized growl rumbling in my own chest.

And so vicious. From the sounds of it you'd think I was as cute as a button, and not a dangerous predator with built-in knives in my mouth and paws. But you're caught, baby. It's time to shift.

Chapter 106 – Caught

Ella

No, I just got out! My wolf rails defiantly. I want to run more! Let me go!

The kisses cease, and now Sinclair's fangs close around my scruff, applying pressure.

I immediately realize what he's doing. If he applies enough pressure – especially if he lifts me off the ground-I'll be completely immobilized. I said shift!

I don't want to! You can be a wolf whenever you want – but this is my only chance. I protest fiercely, snarling as ferociously as I can. Let me go you big bully.

I can tell the games are over now. Sinclair pulls me up, and suddenly I'm hanging from his jaws, my feet kicking helplessly. Yield Ella! I feel his authoritative growl deep in my bones, and even though I didn't agree to surrender, my rebelling limbs suddenly still. I go limp, and when Sinclair returns me to the ground I roll onto my back, showing him my belly.

Good girl. Sinclair's huge black wolf gazes down at me, his emerald eyes blazing with unbridled emotion.

My wolf whimpers in my head. Why does his praise make me feel so incredible?

Because you're mine. His gravelly voice answers, and I realize that I've spoken aloud again. Mine, mine, mine. Before I can think more about his statement, Sinclair is groaning in my head, just look at you, he croons. Al rose gold and sass. I know he's talking about my fur now, which is the same metallic sheen as my strawberry blonde hair.

And your little white tummy. He adds, nuzzling the patch of white fluff above my navel.

Mmm, my pup. My Ella. He sounds like a caveman, but his next words prove his mind

is as sharp as ever.

Shift mate, it's time to finish this.

Finish this? I practically squeak.

Oh yes, Sinclair confirms darkly, his words are so animalistic that I tremble in response. I'm going to mark and claim you before you can get away again. You're mine, and the whole world is going to know it.

All at once, I realize that the Sinclair I know is not in control. This is his wolf talking now, and suddenly I realize why he warned me not to run from him on the night of the Wild Hunt. The rational part of my brain understood. at least I thought it did... but it's one thing to imagine it, and a very different matter to experience it.

The last time I met his wolf, I hadn't been able to hear Sinclair's thoughts. I hadn't understood how different the two beings were – though it makes perfect sense that his most primal self would come out when his inner animal is in charge. Still, I can hardly recognize the Sinclair I've come to know and love in the beast towering over me. Then again, I hardly recognize myself right now. This is all so surreal.

He wants to claim us. My own wolf swoons, yes, yes, yes!

Listen to her, mate. Sinclair orders, she knows what you need.

I shiver With anticipation, but as soon as I contemplate shifting I realize that we have a problem. Dominic, I don't know how to shift. I don't even know how this happened.

Sinclair's hulking black wolf studies me for a moment, before nodding once in understanding and determination. Don't be afraid, sweet one. I'm going to help.

Before I can contemplate what this might mean, a wave of pure Alpha energy washes

over me.

Sinclair lifts his muzzle and howls into the night, and my body shudders and jerks, slowly returning to its human form. I feel a sudden and devastating loss to be back in this skin, but the next thing I know Sinclair is a man once more. He bends down and scoops me up in his arms, carrying me back towards the bed we abandoned at the beginning of the dream.

I'm staring at the bed with wide eyes, amazed to think that we're finally going to be together the way I've been dreaming about for so many months.

Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting for this? Sinclair asks huskily, dipping his head close to mine.

Feeling far braver than I can ever remember being, I grin. Yes, but that's done now.

We don't have to wait a moment longer.

His own beam is full of sultry promise. Thank the Goddess.

My heart is hammering against my ribcage as Sinclair lays me down on the plush coverlet, and for the first time, I realize I'm naked. My night dress must have shredded when I shifted, and though I've been naked with this man dozens of times before, this is... different. It feels so momentous, because I know this time will be unlike any of the others.

Sinclair towers over me, his heated gaze raking over every inch of my bared flesh as if he's been starving for the sight of me. It feels impossibly vulnerable, to be spread out in front of him like a feast to be devoured. I've never known a man who could light me on fire with a single look, but Sinclair manages it without even trying.

I allow myself to peruse his own form in return.

I've always avoided this in the past, but now I let my gaze travel south of the contoured muscles of his abdomen, to the huge, hard length standing at attention against his navel. I can feel my eyes widen in alarm – I've always known that Sinclair is twice my size, but this just seems like overkill.

There is no way that thing will fit inside me.

Then the wolf's deep laughter is washing over me. A fresh rush of defiance sparks in my chest, and I briefly consider fleeing, but Sinclair shakes his head, still laughing.

"Oh no you dont, you naughty girl. You've surrendered. That means you're mine to do with as I wish."

"Tyrant." I accuse, shooting him a sulky look.

"Little wolf, you haven't seen anything yet." He responds ominously. "You're just lucky I'm not putting you over my knee for running like that."

"Oh please, you know you wanted to chase me." I quip saucily, keenly aware of the way he continues to survey my body, a lethal glint in his green eyes.

It feels incredible to know that I have this power over him, that his huge member is hard and pulsing just for me. Feeling devious, I shift on the bed, stretching out my legs and arching my back a bit, showing off my charms. For the first time in a and from very long time, I'm enjoying my beauty the low purr Sinclair emits, so is he.

"You trying to tempt me, minx?" He rumbles appreciatively, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Don't you know that isn't necessary? I need no encouragement to eat you up."

The sound of his pleasure encourages me, and I bat my lashes, adopting an innocent tone. “You could have fooled me – you’re taking forever.” I trail my fingers down the valley between my breasts, drawing his eyes to their path. “You haven’t even touched me yet.”

A fierce growl rips from his chest, and the next thing I know he’s pounced. I suppose it serves me right for challenging his wolf, but I’m not complaining. He settles in the bed with me, balancing his weight on his elbows and settling his hips between my spread thighs. Sinclair lowers his head, his lethal grace belying the crushing force he applies as he slams his mouth into mine.

Any thoughts I had of teasing him further disappear the moment our lips connect. I immediately yield to his dominance, feeling butterflies that have nothing to do with the baby I’m carrying, explode in my belly. I give myself to Sinclair freely, parting my lips to let his tongue delve into my mouth.

I wrap my arms around his neck, nibbling on his lower lip and earning a playful growl in return. The world spins and freezes at once, and all my nerve endings are frayed by the surge of electricity he’s sending through my veins. When Sinclair tries to draw his lips away I chase them, suddenly incapable of remembering how to breathe without him.

He tsks and shushes me with stern affection, kissing his way down my body. He pauses to lave the soft spot behind my ear, and then to suck each of my beaded nipples into his mouth.

I’m not sure if it’s the pregnancy, or if it’s just Sinclair, but I swear I could come from

this stimulation alone. His talented tongue flicks over the hard nubs, sending pulses of desire straight to my core. I wonder if Sinclair is still able to hear my thoughts, because he sets up camp here and doesn't move on until I'm whining and moaning in desperation.

Finally he moves down and hooks his arms beneath my thighs, though he still doesn't show me mercy. Instead he nibbles the inside of my thighs, moving closer and closer to my center and drawing away at the last moment. Seeming to know exactly how badly I need his touch, his own mischievous streak takes over. "Every time I've scented your desire, I've dreamed of this." He informs me, "of tasting the source. I kept telling myself you couldn't possibly taste as sweet as you smell, but I can already tell I was fooling myself."

"Dominic, please!" I finally beg, feeling close to tears.

"Poor darling, why didn't you ask sooner?" He teases. I want to reach down and smack him, but before I can he sucks my needy clit into his mouth, and I explode.

For someone who has never reached Orgasm with a partner at all, Sinclair's skill is overwhelming.

He's only just touched my most intimate flesh, and I'm already falling to pieces. Maybe it's just been a long time coming, and it's certainly true that my body has been wound tight as a spring amidst the sexual tension building in our relationship. Still, I'm seeing stars and all I know is that Sinclair is to blame.

The most devastating part is that he doesn't stop there. I'm still reeling from my release, panting and trying to push him away from my sensitive skin, when he simply

dives deeper. One thick finger enters me as his tongue continues to devour me, and I can only whimper. “Dominic, it’s too much.”

Another deep chuckle meets my ears, and I know I’m in real trouble. “Sweet, naive mate, we’ve only just begun.”

At that, a second finger stretches my channel, thrusting and scissoring apart in a movement that tells me he’s trying to make space for the massive member between his legs. I forget how to breathe, and when the vibrating motion of Sinclair’s tongue is joined by the crook of his fingers inside of me, I fall over the edge again, crying out.

“That’s it.” He praises me. “Come for me, Ella.

Good girl.”

I barely know my own name by the time he looms above me again, claiming my mouth so that I can taste my own honey on his tongue. Velvet wrapped steel presses at my entrance, so thick I’m sure it will never fit, but little by little Sinclair eases his cock into me – proving me wrong.

With endless patience, he rocks into my heat, and too late I realize his thickness wasn’t the true problem. His length seems endless, and I’m sure I can feel him in my throat. By the time Sinclair has buried himself in my sheath, I’m a heartbeat away from coming again – though such a thing should be impossible.

“Fvck Ella,” Sinclair swears, dropping his head to the crook of my neck. “It’s like you were made for me.”

I disagree, though I don’t say it. Any woman made for Sinclair would surely be closer to his own size.

And though he is so large that I'm fairly certain I'll be ruined for all other men, I can't deny how delicious it feels to be possessed by this powerful Alpha.

Sinclair begins to move, thrusting in and out of my slick heat with a feral energy that might have frightened me mere weeks ago, but now I simply wrap my legs around his back, urging him deeper.

His pace increases, and his thrusts tilt upward, slamming into that special spot inside me.

I fall over the edge again, and Sinclair purrs, "greedy girl, haven't you come enough yet?"

I can only whimper, because by now I've realized that I'm a complete goner. My body belongs to Sinclair now, and I'm just along for the ride.

I lose track of time, so consumed in the feelings coursing through me that I can't even remember my own name. I know only that I'll never be the same – in dreams or reality. Sinclair encourages and praises me every step of the way, even though he must know that no woman can withstand this much pleasure – at least, no human woman.

His thrust become more and more forceful, and then I feel his fangs at my throat. He waits until the moment is perfect, until I'm teetering on the edge of an Orgasm stronger than all the others. I'm beside myself, but he seems completely determined. Just as I topple over the edge, he sinks his canines into the tender flesh where my neck meets my shoulder, marking me as his own.

White lights burst in my vision, and warmth floods my body. I'm finally complete.

Chapter 107 – Claimed

Ella

My eyes jerk open, and I surge up in bed.

A moment ago Sinclair was buried inside me – in more ways than one. My hand frantically clamps down on the spot where my neck meets my shoulder. I can still feel Sinclair’s fangs slicing into my flesh, but there doesn’t seem to be a wound in reality.

I’m not bleeding, and it doesn’t hurt – though it hadn’t hurt in the dream either. All of a sudden I’m remembering Sinclair’s ominous words about how a mating mark wouldn’t hurt if it was timed right, and now I understand all too well.

I’m still on an emotional high from the dream, I can’t believe I became a wolf! It had been the most incredible feeling, unlike anything I could have imagined. And then there was Sinclair. My body is flushed with heat, and my heart is still pounding.

It felt so real, and I’m so glad that we stole that moment. At the same time, I wonder if the sex was only so good because it was a fantasy? It had to be, there’s no way anyone could actually be that amazing in real life... right?

The more I think about it, reliving every touch, every word we spoke, I quickly find myself crashing back down to earth. I’m so grateful and ecstatic that it happened, but I’m very quickly feeling depressed that it’s over. Before those feelings can truly take hold, however, I hear pounding footsteps. In the blink of an eye Sinclair is there, standing in the doorway and raking his eyes over me in concern.

“Ella” my name is a relieved sigh on his lips. I realize that he must have fallen asleep in his study, rather than coming to bed – but he’s here now. He crosses the floor quickly, reaching for me as soon as he’s close enough. “Are you alright? You disappeared from the dream so quickly!”

I nod weakly, my face framed in his hands. I’m still feeling sad that our stolen night has come to an end, but I don’t want Sinclair to know just how pitiful I’m feeling. “I don’t know what happened, one moment we were...” I trail off, flushing, “and the next I was here.”

“Goddess, I can’t believe this. Come here” Sinclair settles on the bed, pulling me into his lap. He presses a lingering kiss to my upturned mouth, then rests his forehead against mine, gazing lovingly into my eyes. “My poor little mate, you didn’t even get a chance to come back down to earth.”

Pain blooms in my chest to hear him calling me his mate, but I snuggle in, eager to steal a few extra moments of affection. “Well maybe if you hadn’t ravished me so completely I wouldn’t need so much recovery time.”

“Surely you aren’t complaining about too much pleasure?” Sinclair teases, kissing me again. “If you weren’t such an insatiable little thing then I wouldn’t have had to work so hard to satisfy you.”

I start to laugh at his ridiculous statement, but just as quickly, it verges on a sob.

“Don’t.” I plead, “I’m already struggling to cope with the fact that it’s over.”

“Over?” Sinclair repeats. “What are you talking about?” He pulls back far enough to stare down at me in disbelief. “Stars, Ella don’t you realize what this means?”

“It doesn’t mean anything.” I argue. “It was just a dream, that was the point. A way for us to get closure without complicating things in the real world.”

“Ella, you shifted, you became a wolf! That wouldn’t have been possible if you were truly a human.” He reasons, as if it should be obvious. “But I am a human.” I remind him, feeling increasingly frustrated.

To my utter shock, Sinclair’s face lights up like a firework. He’s grinning down at me so widely it’s difficult not to return the expression, “No baby, I don’t think you are. I was too caught up in claiming you in the dream, but now that my wolf is satisfied I can think a bit more clearly. Don’t you see – this would explain everything: the reason I was so interested in you before you even became pregnant; the fact that you were able to conceive my child; how obstinate my wolf has been about claiming you; your smell; how wolfish your behavior is.” He continues excitedly. “I’ve been attributing everything to the baby because I didn’t have any other explanation, but now it finally makes sense.”

“What makes sense?” I exclaim, not following his logic at all. It seems like he’s operating with far more information than I possess myself. “And what do you mean you were interested in me before, and that your wolf wanted to claim me?”

Sinclair chuckles, and I have to fight the urge to growl at him. “I’m sorry sweetheart, I forgot you didn’t know. Yes, I always noticed you- it was annoyingly distracting every time I caught sight of you in the neighborhood. Every time I did, I’d end up thinking about you for hours afterwards, and I even started hoping I would run into you and the kids. I never did anything about it because I thought you were human.”

“Then why the hell were you such a jerk to me about Cora, and when we found out I was pregnant?” I demand grumpily.

Sinclair exhales heavily. “I was in a bad place. I’m not proud of the way I acted, and I know there’s no excuse for it. I can only say that I was an idiot. But my wolf is the

reason I agreed to your plans in the first place, that’s what I meant when I said I’ve been holding him back. He wanted you for his own long before I was willing to acknowledge my feelings for you.”

“I still can’t believe you love me.” I whisper, feeling shy now. I told myself those sentiments would stay in the dream, but there’s a very silly, insecure part of me that needs to hear it again. As if I’m afraid the dream was just my imagination, even though I know it wasn’t.

Sinclair’s expression softens, his eye crinkling at the edges. “How could I not?” He croons, making me melt. “You’re everything I could hope for in a mate, Ella.” I’m thrilled to hear these words, but I’m also confused. I know I’m being very slow on the uptake, and it’s hard not to feel stupid, but I simply don’t understand what he’s on about. I would know if I wasn’t human, wouldn’t I? Seeing my expression, some of the elation fades from Sinclair’s features. “I should have looked into this ages ago. but I suppose hindsight is 20/20. In very rare cases, it’s possible for wolves to be hidden, buried so that a person doesn’t even know it’s there.”

“How?” I press eagerly, seeming to need this answer as badly as I need to breathe.

Sinclair removes one of his hands from my body in order to rub the back of his neck, and I find myself glaring at the movement, affronted that he took away the comfort of his touch. Sinclair catches the look on my face and arches a foreboding brow, forcing me to soften and avert my gaze. It feels the way it had when I showed him my belly in the dream, and I understand that something inside me is instinctively responding to

his dominance.

Only once I've submit, does he continue. "The strange thing about all this is that normally when a wolf is dormant, it's manifested in children who were separated from both their family and the pack. They grow up thinking they're human, but when they reach puberty and go through their first shift, their wolf drives them to find their own kind." He grimaces. "We call it dormant, but really it's just when a child is too disconnected to know why they're different. When they eventually figure it out a young teenager shows up at a pack's doorstep – confused and traumatized to be sure, but finally understanding why they've always been an outsider among humans. I've never heard of a case where someone reached adulthood without their wolf manifesting."

"But you think that's what's happened to me?" I clarify, needing to hear him say it.

"You think I'm a wolf, and somehow that part of me just hasn't been able to come out?"

"Yes, trouble." Sinclair beams, all the confusion and mystery forgotten for a moment.

When he looks at me this way I feel like I'm the center of his entire universe, and 'll be damned if it isn't addictive. "I don't know how or why yet, but it's fairly clear to me that you're the one I've been waiting for all along. The Goddess sent you to carry this pup because you're my second chance mate."

His hand moves to my belly, and Rafe kicks in reply. "You can be my Luna. We can finally be together – and not only in our dreams."

"Really?" I squeak, not wanting to believe my ears, just in case they're wrong.

"Really." He confirms. "We're going to figure out how this happened, and then we're

going to wake your wolf for real.”

Chapter 108 – DNA Test

Ella

Sinclair and I stay up late into the night talking, reveling in this new discovery. I'd believed our dream date would give us closure, but it turns out it wasn't the end at all – it was the beginning. "It's no wonder you've been feeling so off-kilter."

Sinclair consoles, trailing his fingers up and down my naked back. When he'd started stripping me, I thought we were going to make love again something I was only too eager to experience outside of my dreams.

Unfortunately he'd informed me that his wolf wouldn't be able to resist marking me for real, so we'd better wait until we know it's safe. Of course as soon as he mentioned claiming me, the little voice in my head had gone wild with excitement. I'd attempted to change his mind, showing off my curves and plying him with kisses.

However when my hand snuck down to close around his hard length, he'd put a quick stop to my tricks, seizing the offending limbs and pinning me in place. I'd whined and growled, but he only growled back, giving my bottom a few hard swats.

Now I'm sprawled across his chest, chastised and sulking, and he clearly thinks he can make me feel better by sympathizing – the tyrant. "It's not just the pregnancy or the stress. You've finally found your own kind, and your inner wolf has been coming out more and more."

I sniff, preparing to argue, but then his words sink in. My inner wolf.. the little voice in my head.. she's the one that's been urging me to behave so oddly lately. I can never recall her being so vocal before, or so unreasonable. I always assumed it was my conscience, but in hindsight... are consciences usually so defiant? Do they usually have personalities of their own, and feel separate and part of you at the same time?

Suddenly I remember how that same inner voice had cried out her joy at being free when I shifted in the dream. Conscience? I think hesitantly. Are... are you my wolf?

Well duh. She responds dryly. It certainly took you long enough to figure it out. Why didn't you tell me! I exclaim in reply, exasperated. I thought you knew! You're always talking to me! She counters hotly. Sinclair is watching me closely, a knowing look on his face. "Wolves can be very contrary at times."

"I... I've always had this voice." I share softly, my eyes wide, "I had no idea." He nods. "When you grow up among wolves your elders teach you that voice is your inner animal, that's part of why it's so important that shifters are raised among their packs."

"I still don't understand." I admit, feeling completely overwhelmed. "If this is all real, then

why did I ever shift when I was old enough, why is she only coming out now?"

"I hate to say it, Ella." Sinclair begins gravely. "But I think it's likely that someone did this to you.. that they bound your wolf so she couldn't get out."

"What do you mean?" I inquire, my muscles tensing nervously. "You have to understand that if a pack knows a child exists and something happens to their parents, then the pup will be placed with a relative or a shifter family willing to foster them.

Our children are incredibly important to us, and it would be neglect of the worst kind to knowingly let them be raised among humans.

The only time it happens is when the parents didn't have any connections in the shifter world, usually they're rogues or outside their own territory. Every case I've ever heard of a dormant wolf begins with a child being found by humans at the sight of an accident, or wandering unattended in the wilderness or a strange city." Sinclair explains stroking my hair with a pitying expression. "Okay." I nod, not sure where this is going. "So maybe my parents were from a different pack?"

He shakes his head. "Sweetheart, I looked into your records at the orphanage when all this began. You weren't found by the humans... you were given to them. Your parents surrendered you directly to the orphanage. There weren't any names in the file –

which shouldn't have been allowed, but it's part of why I never entertained the idea that you might be a wolf. I thought if you were dormant it would have shown years ago, and that no shifters would ever give their pup to the humans." It surprises me how badly this information hurts.

I'd never known my family history – I left the orphanage before I reached adulthood, and it wasn't the institution's policy to share details like this with children. Still, I don't know any orphan who hasn't concocted a fantasy that their parents would come for them one day. No one wants to believe they were just abandoned... unwanted."

"Why didn't you tell me?" "Because I thought it was in the past, and that it would only hurt you." Sinclair frowns, using the pad of his thumb to wipe away a rogue tear. "But now that we know the truth... it suggests that something much bigger is going on here, Ella. I think your parents must have been trying to hide you for some reason, and they cut you off from your wolf to make sure you wouldn't be found"

"So how do we find out for sure?" I ask, not sure how to feel about this idea. Is it worse to just be abandoned, or for people who are supposed to love you most, to intentionally cut you off from your true soul?

Sinclair hugs me close, seeing how badly I need his comfort. "We get a DNA test,

to start.” He proclaims. “And then we take it one step at a time.”

The next morning I find myself sitting in the familiar doctor’s office, with two very serious looking wolves towering over me. The nearest one, Sinclair, looks as if he’s trying to glower the physician into the ground, and I suspect he’s feeling particularly protective after watching the man withdraw my blood. Apparently his wolf can’t stand seeing me bleed, even if it’s just for a test.

I lean into his side, not sure whether it’s to soothe him or myself. “Well, it’s confirmed.” The doctor confirms, “You’re a wolf, Ella.”

Sinclair’s arm squeezes my shoulders, and I feel his lips graze my hair. “Then why didn’t I know, why can’t I shift?” I inquire, only sounding a little petulant.

“I don’t know.” He purses his lips regretfully. “All this test tells us is that you have shifter DNA. I can refer you to a geneticist to try and decipher a particular family line, traits, whether you’re an alpha or omega, but unless someone else in your family has given samples, we won’t know who you are or how this happened. That’s probably something you’ll have to figure out yourself.”

“Do you know how we can wake her inner wolf completely?” Sinclair questions. “It’s obviously been coming out since we met, especially with the baby, but it’s still buried deep.”

“Well the bad news is that you’ll probably have to wait until your pup is born.” The physician informs us. As soon as your wolf does wake, you’ll probably go into your first shift. Normally it’s perfectly safe for breeding she-wolves to shift because it’s instantaneous. But a first shift breaks all the bones and tears muscles – as you know, Alpha. There’s no telling what it would do to the baby.”

“But I shifted in the dream, and that was instant.” I remind Sinclair.

“It’s not the same, sweetheart.” Sinclair shakes his head sadly. “Pups can dream as their wolves too, the first time is still awful.”

“You mean I have to give birth and have all my bones broken sometime in the near future?” I demand indignantly. Before Sinclair can reply, the doctor chimes in, let’s just hope it’s not the same day, Ella.”

“What?” both of our heads jerk towards the man, and my heart stalls in my chest. “Well, uh – that’s the thing.” The doctor hedges, watching Sinclair warily. A low growl is rumbling steadily in the Alpha’s chest, and I wonder if it wasn’t meant to be a purr to calm me, only he wasn’t calm enough himself to manage it. “A couple of things could wake her wolf naturally. If you were to claim her as your mate, or giving birth.

It's also possible that neither of those things will do it and you'll have to find another way." He holds up his hands. "These are just guesses mind you, but the fact that her wolf has been coming out in response to you and the baby would indicate that her mate or he child might be enough to break whatever binds her wolf. So if birth triggers it, it might be... well, back-to-back."

"Why would you tell her that with so little tact." Sinclair snarls. "She's already under enough stress. " "I'm sorry, Alpha, these are uncharted waters for all of us." The doctor says, tucking an invisible tail between his legs. "It just came out."

"And I suppose you have no idea how we might bring out her wolf if those things don't work?" Sinclair interrogates through gritted teeth.

"No. I've never seen a case like this. I think you need to go to the elders, if anyone knows about this kind of magic, it's them."

Sinclair growls, scooping me up off the table. "

Then we'll go to the elders."

Chapter 109 – The Elder

Ella

“What do you mean she’s not a wolf?” The elder to whom Sinclair brought me to meet looks vaguely familiar, and I’m sure I’ve met him at some event or another. Still, I’m in such a daze with all this new information, that I can barely keep up. I feel like my brain isn’t working properly anymore. I feel slow and stupid, but Sinclair is beside me every step of the way, being patient and loving, scowling every time I suggest there’s anything wrong with my mind.

Now this elder is looking at us with barely contained horror, and I can only burrow deeper into Sinclair’s arms. I’m in his lap again, though again isn’t really correct –

since he hasn’t put me down once. I’m technically still on bedrest, but I’m not complaining. I feel safe when I’m in his embrace, and I need that security now more than ever. “She is, but it’s dormant. We only just found out.” Sinclair sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. He slowly shares our story with the older man, all the way from the beginning.

With every word out of Sinclair’s mouth, the elder pales a little further. When he’s finally caught up, he glowers, “You should have come to me the moment she conceived, I could have told you no human could bear a shifter child. You young pups,” He shakes his head in exasperation, “You think you know everything!”

“I’m hardly a pup.” Sinclair responds dryly, though he doesn’t truly seem bothered. The elder looks down his nose at him. “I’d already been roaming this world a hundred years by the time you were born, boy. I might not have your power, but I possess wisdoms you could only dream about.” My eyes widen when I hear him share his age.

I knew that shifters lived longer than humans, but I didn’t realize it was this long. The man in front of me only looks about seventy.

“That’s why we’re here now, Adolpho” Sinclair answers smoothly. “I didn’t come before because I thought protecting the secret was too important.” His hand trails to my tummy, setting over the small bump of our pup. “I just wanted them to be safe “

Adolpho softens slightly, observing our closeness. “Aye, I know how it is. Breeding is an emotional time for mothers and fathers both” He wags his finger, “You can be forgiven for protecting your mate, but the deception is another matter” He’s on his feet and pacing, again proving how remarkably spry he is for a 135 year old, “Do you have any idea what you’ve risked here? If this gets out, your campaign will be over. The pack loves Ella, they’re obsessed with your romance, if they think this has all been a lie- it will be a betrayal of the worst kind.”

“My campaign was already going to be over before Ella came along. The only reason I’m winning is because of her.” Sinclair responds fiercely. “I don’t like lying to the pack either, but I was between a rock and a hard place of the worst kind”

“The Alpha council aren’t fools. If it truly looked like the Prince was going to win, they would have come to your aid” Adolpho suggests tiredly.

“Neither the people nor the council were going to put a bachelor on the throne – especially not one they believed was sterile.” Sinclair insists, “We’re in this situation because King Xavier died without an heir – they want stability for the crown.. and they’re right to”

“Still, we could have found another way” Adolpho insists, sounding resigned now. Like Henry, he seems to be wishing for a solution that doesn’t exist – another way to have handled this, though no other options are presenting themselves.

If you want someone to blame, you can blame me” I interject. “It was my idea. I thought I could help Dominic win, and I was afraid for my baby if he didn’t. I was afraid to everyone. You were protecting the pack before you even realized it.” Sinclair praises, kissing my cheek. “

And the way I see it this is what the Goddess intended. The fact that Ella appeared and conceived my child right when I needed her most?

That this baby might save the united packs from a cruel, blood-thirsty tyrant? If that isn’t fate, I don’t know what is.”

“Maybe. The elder acknowledges, “or maybe it was the design of someone else. You said yourself that someone powerful was involved in switching the sperm samples, and now that you have this piece of the puzzle? He surmises, gesturing to me.

Whoever it was must have known Ella wasn’t truly a human. And the fact that she was sent to that bank, right when your deposit was made-“

What do you mean, sent?” I interrupt. “I went there because my sister is a scientist at the lab. My boyfriend My dear, the reason you couldn’t get pregnant with your boyfriend is because he was

human and you are not. The elder answers, almost as if he read my thoughts. “It also means that human medications are unlikely to have damaged your body whatsoever.”

“But the doctor told me-“ I begin to object, trailing off as I recall the horrible conversation that started all this, that sent me running home to discover Mike’s deception. The doctor

who told me that I had to conceive immediately – that very day even though I know better than to believe such a thing. I'd been so shocked and frightened I hadn't questioned it, but is anything ever truly that cut and dry when it comes to fertility? "Oh my Goddess, I've been so stupid."

Adolpho offers me a small nod, watching my expression. "Let me guess, was this the first time you'd seen this specialist?" "Yes," I gulp, "my usual doctor was sick and so another physician stepped in."

"And your sister – did she examine you?" He presses. "No." I shake my head, feeling dizzy now. "She just looked at the report."

"Wait," Sinclair interrupts, in a tone that makes my stomach drop. Oh Goddess, what has he figured out? I don't think I can handle any more surprises." If her body wasn't actually damaged... are you saying that Ella might be able to have more children?"

I freeze in place, looking to the older man with something between fear and hope. Everything is changing so quickly, I'm not sure how many more surprises I can handle – good or bad. "A shifter physician would have to examine her for sure, but I can't see any reason why not." The elder observes.

I can hardly breathe. Sinclair is hugging and kissing me, and then his hands are on my face, wiping away tears I hadn't realized I've been shedding. "I can't believe this." I murmur, looking up at him, needing to draw on his strength. "It's too much." "I know." He assures me, purring softly. "It's okay, we don't have to talk about it now."

"But we do! We have to find that doctor." I realize abruptly. "If you're suggesting that they knew what I really was, and that they sent me running to Cora knowing that Dominic's sample was at her lab... I mean, it's all too crazy to be true. Who could possibly know so much, predict so much?"

"I suspect Dominic is right in part – the Goddess did play a hand in this. But she didn't do it alone." Adolpho agrees. "More importantly Ella, if the people responsible for this knew you were a wolf, it means they know who you really are."

"Then, you don't have any idea about what her true identity might be?" Sinclair inquires, watching the elder closely. Adolpho extends a hand to me, and I clamber out of Sinclair's lap, going to stand in front of the old wolf. His gaze sweeps over me, his eyes lingering on my own gold irises and strawberry-blonde hair. "

Her fur, in the dream?" He inquires. "The same color as her hair, except for a splash of white at the tip of her tail and on her belly."

Sinclair answers, Sounding reverent as he describes my wolf Adolpho smells me then,

and I try not to move or squirm. He shakes his head in defeat. "There is something there... it's familiar, but I can't place it.

A rare smell for a wolf in these parts. I expect it will be easier to tell once your wolf wakes completely."

"Do you know a way to make that happen?" I inquire anxiously, "other than Dominic claiming me, or giving birth?" Adolpho nods, "give me a minute."

When he returns a few minutes later, he's carrying a small ceramic box, painted with mysterious patterns I don't recognize, but which seem strangely familiar. He slides the lid open, revealing a collection of dried flowers. "Our people have used these herbs for centuries in rituals to the Goddess, they're meant to trigger a transcendent journey, a way to get in touch with your innermost spirit. If anything can reconnect you to your wolf, it will be them but I think the doctor was right to advise you to wait until the pup arrives."

I accept the box gingerly, and Adolpho continues. It should only take a few. Wait, but keep it close... you might need them in an emergency, whether your baby is ready to be born

Chapter 110 – Nesting

Sinclair

I decide to work from home for the rest of the day. I'm so amazed by everything that's happening, and overwhelmed by how much our lives have changed in the last 48 hours. Two days ago I was grieving the relationship I believed was impossible, wishing against all logic that Ella could be a wolf.

Now all our dreams have come true, yet I feel reluctant to trust these changes. It's all too wonderful, even if mysterious forces have clearly been at work – pulling the strings of our lives from far away.

I hate the idea that someone has been watching and manipulating us from afar – even if it is the Goddess. Still, the Goddess isn't what frightens me most. The thing that frightens me most is knowing that someone out there knows the truth about Ella, they know secrets she and I have yet to uncover, and might use them against us.

True, it seems that bringing us together was for our benefit, but the picture is never clear until it's complete. Shifters in this city know exactly how vulnerable Ella is right now, and we can't wake her wolf for another three and a half months, at least. Around seven I realize that I'm not going to get any more work done this evening.

Instead I head upstairs to my bedroom, expecting to find my sweet mate resting before dinner. Instead, I walk in to find Ella out of bed and pacing, overflowing with anxious energy. The second thing I notice is that every pillow, blanket and cushion in the linen closet has been piled onto the bed, and the canopy curtains drawn closed.

Ella stops in her tracks when she sees me, wringing her hands. "Baby, what is it?" I ask, crossing over to her. "You're supposed to be in bed."

She shakes her head. "It's not right. I've been trying to fix it but I can't.. it's not right."

I pull her into my arms, purring softly as she tucks her head against my chest and breathes in my scent. "What's not right. How can I help?"

"The bed." She huffs, gesturing to it sullenly. "It's not cozy enough. Your pillows are terrible, and none of the blankets are soft enough."

For a moment I think she's lost her beautiful little mind, but slowly it clicks into place. How many times have I heard about other fathers coping with a mate in this exact state? These instincts are as powerful as all the cravings and mood swings, and they're also further proof of Ella's true identity. I chuckle happily, and Ella stiffens. "Are you laughing at me? This has been a really stressful day you know, I don't need to be laughed at."

“No trouble, not at you.” I promise. “It’s just that you’re nesting.” “Nesting, like cleaning everything and setting up a nursery?” She clarifies, her adorably brow furrowing in confusion, “but that shouldn’t come until later, and we’ve already picked out most of the baby stuff.”

“No, it’s a little more literal with wolves, Ella. These are just more of your maternal instincts coming out.” I explain. “It’s probably made worse by the bed rest, you’re stuck in this room with nowhere to go, it’s only natural that you want to make yourself as cozy a spot to welcome the pup as possible.”

“Except that I can’t because your dumb bed is giant and everything is wrong.” She complains, unbuttoning my shirt so she can nuzzle her face against my bare skin. I hum in sympathy, scooping her up. “Well then let me help.” I suggest, my own alpha instincts urging me to settle her. I deposit her on the bed, then move to the intercom by the bedroom door, sending my guards for every pillow and blanket in the house.

They gradually cart them up over the next half hour, and I dutifully let my sweet little mate direct me as she creates her nest. I hand her pillows and blankets, then accept them back if they don’t fit the indescribable qualifications she’s seeking. I have no idea what’s going on in her mind, but I know enough to realize this isn’t a matter of logic.

Her inner wolf is pushing her to satisfy a powerful craving that she probably doesn’t understand any more than I do when my wolf urges me to scent mark her. It’s all feelings and one word commands, primal and powerful – not to be ignored.

When the bed is finally right she climbs in, preening with maternal pride and offering me a satisfied smile that makes me want to kiss her so badly it hurts. “Am I allowed in there with you?” I ask, beaming down at her. Ella frowns for a moment, obviously contemplating this, She narrows her eyes, “As long as you don’t mess it up.”

Laughing, I kick off my shoes and move onto the bed, careful not to dislodge any of her carefully placed pillows. Right as I settle beside her, I accidentally knock one of the overstuffed poufs out of position, and a kittenish growl rises in her chest. That’s when I snatch her up, replacing the offended cushion as I pull her small body onto mine.

For a while I simply kiss Ella, elated that I’m finally able to be with her so freely. Every other time we’ve gotten carried away with affection, it’s filled me with guilt and distraction about our tenuous future. But now it simply feels right.

“I keep daydreaming about what it will be like when your wolf finally emerges completely.” I share a little while later. “It was distracting me all day long.” I admit, stroking her spine as she nibbles my ear. “You’ve shown such ferocity already,

and you have so much love to give – you'll truly be the perfect queen." I exalt, loving the shy blush that colors her cheeks. "We'll usher in a new era for the united packs, while we raise a whole litter. I'll give you so many babies that she won't know what to do with them."

Ella offers me a sultry giggle, squirming against me in a way that tells me she's getting excited just talking about this. Still, she sighs, a familiar look of hesitation on her lovely features. "Don't, we don't know what the future holds yet. And I'll be happy even if it's just the three of us."

"But you'd like more if you can get them?" I guess, understanding her reluctance to get her hopes up.

I know only too well how hard it is to let yourself dream after so much disappointment. "I've never shared a bloodline or DNA with anyone ..I've never had that bond. Rafe is the first person in my life who ll experience that with." Ella confides, "it's part of why I wanted a child of my own. To be biologically connected at least once.

And I love being pregnant... but I don't need all my babies to have my genes."

"What if I want my babies to all have your genes." I tease, sliding my hand down over her luscious behind. "They're damned good genes."

Ella laughs but holds firm. "If we can't have more pups on our own, I know how many orphans out there need a good home." There's something haunted in her last words, and I find myself squeezing her more tightly. Still, despite her pain, an incandescent smile takes over her features, and she buries her head in my neck, laughing. "I can't even believe this is real." She exclaims. "I never imagined that we'd get to have a life together.. I wanted to be a wolf so badly, and I never thought I would be."

Ella can't see my face, so I don't hide my grimace. "

I'm happier than I've ever been with you, you know that?"

She peeks up at me, a spark of mischief in her eye. "You're sounding awfully emotional there, Alpha. You're not going to start crying, are you?"

When I only frown, the spark in her eye flickers out, and I hate myself for dampening her high spirits. "I think we've been putting off talking about your past long enough, Ella. It's more important than ever now." "But I don't know anything." She insists, looking confused again. "I was a baby when this all started."

"I know sweetheart." I confirm, "but if we're right about this.. then it's likely the people behind this have been watching you for your whole life. The answer to all of this

could be somewhere in your own history.” I explain. “And besides, I need to know because... because you’re my mate. I can’t take care of you if I don’t know what you’ve been through. You did promise to open up to me eventually.”

Her face falls, and I realize the naughty creature probably hadn’t intended on actually following through on that particular promise. Ella looks up at me from beneath her lashes, as if she’s testing my resolve. When I only stare gravely back, she sighs. “I don’t even remember everything.” She confesses softly. “I’ve blocked so much of it out.”

“Then we can work with a therapist, or a hypnotist, but maybe you can tell me what you do remember?” Looking as though she’s headed to the gallows, Ella nods. “Okay”

Chapter 111 – Orphan Gang

Ella

“Cora tell me what happened.” I demand, crossing my skinny arms over my chest. I’m eight years old, glaring down at my surrogate sister with a stern expression. It’s always been this way between us.

She’s a year older, but I’ve always had the dominant personality. “It was nothing.” She insists, averting her gaze from my own. “You’re lying.” I counter stubbornly. “I can always tell, you know.”

“No, you think you always know.” Cora answers sullenly, though we both know I’m right. I can read my sister like a book.

“Would you just tell me?” I press, sighing with exasperation. “Fine, it’s not even a big deal, it was just some of the big kids being jerks.” She explains gravely.

“Which ones?” I respond immediately. “Point them out.” It could be anyone, considering the fact that even children our own age tend to be bigger than us. It seems like the orphanage physician labels us undersized and undernourished every year, though nothing ever changes.

Reluctantly, Cora points toward a familiar gang of kids, ranging from age eleven to fourteen. The ringleader is a beefy thirteen year old who always wears a cruel leer as if he’s ever on the lookout for someone to bully to tears – just for the fun of it. “

You see, there’s nothing we can do about it- they run this place.” “I beg to differ.” I answer, tilting my chin up defiantly. “We don’t have to be bigger than them just smarter. Now tell me what they said to you?”

Cora’s voice is so low I almost can’t hear her speak. She stares at the ground, her shoulders slumped in defeat. “They called me a worthless gutter rat and said no one would ever adopt me cuz I’m too ugly.”

Protective fury boils up inside of me. This is the weak spot for any abandoned child. None of us know what it’s like to be wanted or unconditionally loved, and the only thing that keeps us going is the hope that we might get parents one day. As far as I’m concerned, targeting my sister’s biggest sensitivity deserves a serious punishment.

“I’ll kill them.” I seethe, my tiny hands closing into fists. “Ella no.” Cora argues, completely disheartened. “I mean, maybe they have a point. We’re getting old now, and you know how it is. Parents only ever want the babies. I mean you might have a chance – you’re so pretty... but I have to be realistic.”

“Cora, I want parents just as badly as you do, but I’m not gonna leave you for anything.” I vow. I’d like to see any grown up try to take me away from the orphanage without her. “We’re sisters.”

“It’s easy for you to say that.” Cora offers me a hesitant smile. “You adopt all the outcasts.” This isn’t the first time she’s said this to me. I do have a way of taking the most skittish and rejected of our peers under my wing, but it’s not as if I can just stand by and let them be mistreated, or leave them to fend for themselves. We all need each other.

“Everyone here is an outcast.” I remind her. “Why else do you think the big kids are so mean. They’re mad that no one ever picked them and they take it out on us cuz they think we might still have a chance.”

“Does that mean you’re going to let them off them hook?” She asks, arching a brow. “Of course not, I’m just gonna remind them that we’re in this together.” I answer reasonably, trying to calm my own ire. Cora’s teeth flash in a pearly grin. “And if they don’t listen?”

“Then I’ll kick them in the pants.” I sniff, turning on my heels to march up to the bullies in question. Cora trails along behind me, whispering anxiously about what a bad idea this is. I don’t listen, determined to defend her no matter the odds.

“Hey you, didn’t anyone ever teach you to pick on someone your own size?” I call while we’re still a few meters away. The older children turn around, then laugh when they see I’m the one who spoke. The ringleader rises to his feet, then scoffs, “Even if they did, that ain’t you, pipsqueak.”

“It is if you account for brains.” I bite back. “You shouldn’t be mean to Cora just cuz you’re unhappy. That isn’t fair and she doesn’t deserve it.”

“Oh yeah, and what are you gonna do about it, brat?” He stalks forward, looming over my small body with malicious intent. “A scrawny little thing like you? You’re even more useless than she is.”

He reaches out and shoves me, both of his hands slamming into my shoulders. At first I stumble back, but something is rising up inside me, something powerful and fearless. I snarl and pounce, scrabbling up the older boy’s body and attacking him tooth and nail, He screams and flails his arms. “What – hey! Get her off me!

What is this!” I don’t relent. Hands grab for me, but I dig my nails into his flesh, biting and scratching with all my strength. As I come back to the present, I realize how strange my behavior had been that day. Normal human girls don’t act like that – do they?

“You did that?” Sinclair asks, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards. I nod, “The way

Cora tells it, that's the day I became the de facto leader of the orphanage, just by being scrappy enough to take on the big kids. When it was over I tended his wounds, and from then on they were all loyal to me. My own little gang."

"You made your own pack." Sinclair observes, massaging my tense shoulders. His words sink into my mind slowly, but I gradually recognize the truth in them – not only the wolfish group I formed, but the fact I was able to wrangle the other children in the first place.

"It all makes sense now." I muse aloud. "I was able to beat him because I'm a wolf.. I mean I'm sure I wouldn't have been any match for a pup that wasn't dormant, but the human kids still weren't as strong. I never understood how I won before."

"Strength isn't everything – from the sounds of it you were a born leader, and that has nothing to do with being a wolf – not alone at least." He praises, dipping his head to deposit a few lingering kisses on my neck. "My fierce Ella."

"Yeah well, that was before." I answer, my voice taking on a hollow quality I hate. "Before what?" Sinclair questions, his huge body going still beside mine.

I shrug. "It was easy to be fierce before I knew how much there was in the world to fear." I share hesitantly. "I didn't know how much worse it could get back then. It reached a point where I couldn't protect the other kids anymore." I confess. "Or myself.."

I'm fidgeting now, unable to look Sinclair in the eye. "What Cora said about me being pretty... she didn't come up with that on her own. She was just repeating what she heard from the grown ups. I mean, I know that's not why.. " I'm stumbling over my words now, changing tracks and not making any sense, but I can't help it. "I know those things happen to lots of girls no matter what they look like.. but it's what they always said when..." I shake my head, unable to finish the thought.

Unwanted images are flashing through my vision, and I force them away before they can consume me completely. A new thought occurs to me then, a revelation I hadn't been able to focus on earlier, but which now makes our circumstances seem even more surreal. "Dominic, I'm not sure we're on the right path with all this. I don't think anyone was keeping track of me after I was given to the humans."

"Why do you say that?" He inquires curiously, only seeming willing to be distracted because this is so important.

"Because if they'd been watching me... then they would have known everything that was going on in the orphan age." I explain, "And I can't believe they would have just stood by and let those things happen to a child they cared about."

Sinclair is up on his elbow, looking down at me with a furrowed brow. His powerful hands are stroking my side, but I think he knows there isn't anything he can do to make this better. "What things, sweetheart?"

I take a deep breath, but it comes out shaky and weak. I clench my eyes shut, and a stray tear escapes. "I'm sorry, I don't think I can do this."

"You don't have to if you aren't ready, Ella." He cuddles me closer, and I hiccup in thanks. "We're going to get to the bottom of this. But for now, I'm here and you're safe. I'm not going to let anything hurt you ever again."

I lean into his warmth, stunned to realize I believe him. Even though the Prince and all his henchmen are out to kill me, I feel completely secure with Sinclair, and that's not a feeling I ever expected to experience with any man. I'm overflowing with love as I smile up at the huge Alpha, "I know."

Chapter 112 – Ella Tempts Fate

Ella

“Sometimes it amazes me that I can even be with you this way.” I tell Sinclair, nuzzling his shoulder.

We’re still in his bed, and I’m not fully recovered from our conversation yet. I’m beginning to think a hypnotist might truly be necessary in order to open the doors to my past, but for right now I’m merely thrilled to revel in the heady glow of our love nest. “I learned to trust Mike with my body – but I could never tell him any of this...

then again, he wouldn’t have wanted to know.” Sinclair purrs, “Well if you hadn’t already figured it out, I think it’s fair to say you’ve made a serious upgrade from that weasel.”

“oh I know it” I reply, my head whirling with emotions. I still feel a bit fragile, but I’m also aching to feel close to Sinclair. I need to feel his steady strength, and I want to stop dwelling in the past. I want to make new memories with this man – good memories to replace all the bad ones hanging over my head. “You are better in every way, Dominic.” I tell him in a sultry tone, moving to straddle his waist.

Sinclair chuckles, running his hands up my thighs and underneath the hem of my night dress, settling on my hips “Are you trying to seduce me, trouble?”

“I’m just curious to see if reality can live up to my dreams.” I shrug, trying not to feel too embarrassed by my brazen behavior. “You know, that was the first time I’ve ever had an orgasm I didn’t give myself.”

“Oh really?” His pupils dilate, black pools slowly eating up his emerald irises. “You really weren’t kidding about Mike’s shortcomings.”

I bite my lip and shake my head, lowering my body to his until the tips of my breasts graze his muscular chest. “And I haven’t even experienced it for real yet.”

Sinclair groans, his fists compulsively squeezing my bare skin. “Baby, we’ve been over this. If we start this, I won’t be able to stop.”

“Start what?” I inquire innocently, kissing his neck as I deftly unbutton his shirt. Inch after inch of his contoured abs appear, dusted with a swath of dark hair. I slide my palms over the hard planes, pushing the fabric of his clothing out of the way. I nibble his jaw and lean up to press my lips to his, but before I succeed I find myself flipped onto my back. Suddenly the massive Alpha is hovering over me, his eyes glowing with untamed desire.

“Ella, we can’t.” He insists, but the words are dragged out of him in a ragged growl. “If I claim you it might wake your wolf.”

That was a mistake. The moment he mentions claiming me, the little voice in my head goes wild, Oh yes, please. My wolf begs. I need to be his. I need his mark.

She's not the only one; suddenly all I can think about is Sinclair sinking his teeth into that special spot. I need to feel that one-ness with him, the white light which burst in my soul at the height of our shared dream. I was already turned on, but now my desire skyrockets. I'm going wild with need for him, and all other thoughts have disappeared.

Make him claim us! I'll go crazy if he doesn't. "But we don't know that it will. There's only a chance, right?" I suggest. It's not that I don't care about the risk to my baby, it's simply that this need has knocked all the logic out of my head.

The doctor was only guessing – no one really knows how this all works." I press, reaching for him again. Sinclair promptly catches my wrists and pins them above my head. I'm completely immobilized, which I would have expected to frighten me or trigger a panic attack, instead it fills me with a sense of utter safety. I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, "don't you want to?"

"Goddess Ella, I already want to claim you so badly it's killing me." He rumbles, sounding as though he's barely hanging onto his control. "Please don't make this harder than it has to be. The risks are too great." His sharp eyes are piercing straight through me, and his raw power is washing over me in waves, urging me to submit even as it fuels my lust. "Make no mistake, I can't wait for your wolf to emerge, but not at the cost of the baby."

My lower lip begins to quiver as I realize I'm truly playing with fire. No, not the baby. We can't hurt the baby. My wolf insists, sounding more conflicted than I've ever heard her. Rafe, my Rafe.

The horrible thing is that, as guilty as I feel about potentially endangering my unborn child, I'm still positively squirming with need.

"I don't want to hurt him either." I tell Sinclair, my voice a mere squeak. "I know, little one." Sinclair assures me, "I never thought you did. It's just your instincts. I'm afraid that dream was a blessing and a curse – we know what you are now, but your wolf is also fighting harder to come out now that she's tasted freedom. She's going to push us both, Ella."

"So what do we do?" I ask anxiously. "How do I keep her at bay?" A low growl sounds in my head, and I realize the predator in question does not appreciate this suggestion. Oh hush. I scold her, you're not helping things.

"I'll help you." Sinclair promises, flashing his fangs at me in a way that's both

ravenous and reassuring. "I'll give you the relief you need, and if your wolf pushes me to claim her, I'll remind her who's in charge here." His dark promise sends a delicious shiver down my spine, but Sinclair is still speaking low in my ear. "It's the most natural thing in the world that she wants my mark, but it's my mark to give, not hers to take."

I writhe in his arms, whimpering pitifully. When I speak, it's as if the voice in my head is speaking out of my own mouth. "But I want it."

"And I'll give it to you when the time is right, mate." Sinclair purrs, his husky tones vibrating through my body with utmost authority. This isn't the first time I've felt as though I'm speaking directly to his wolf, but it is the first time I've experienced my own inner animal taking over in response.

I arch my back, pressing up against him, and wind my legs around his waist, rocking my hips up towards his hardness. He growls, but I extend my neck, showing off the slender column and all but begging for his bite. I don't even recognize myself in this moment: I'm feral and wanton, and I don't even care.

"Keep it up, Ella." He warns, shackling both of my wrists in one of his large hands so that the other can glide down and close over my undulating bottom. "And you're going to get yourself a punishment instead of a reward."

The creature inside me isn't sure which she would prefer. I remember how incredible it felt to be dominated so completely by Sinclair. Another mystery explained: of course I enjoyed him taking control that way – since it's exactly what she-wolves need from their mates. Still, right now the word reward is far more tempting. Sinclair has made it clear he isn't going to cave, so I can keep pushing him and earn another demonstration of his power, or I can just let him make me feel good.

Sinclair's expression softens as he watches me deliberate, but only just. "You're going to have plenty of chances to rebel in the future, mate. Tonight, let's just be together."

"You're really going to make me wait until after the baby arrives?" I clarify, sounding horrified. "When my body will be a disaster zone and we'll be completely sleep-deprived, not to mention have a kingdom to run?"

"We'll manage it, Ella. You'll see." Sinclair vows, softening his hold on my body, and pressing a lingering kiss to my lips.

When we part I can only gaze up at him with liquid eyes. "And in the meantime?" I ask hopefully, thinking again of his promised reward. Please let that mean he's going to touch me!

He chuckles, glancing at the bedding around us. In the meantime, you're not the only

one who wants to see if reality lives up to dreams.” He rears up, stripping off my flimsy night dress and sliding my body up onto the pillows. “I think it’s long past time that I taste you again.”

As he settles between my legs, hooking his arms beneath my thighs and lowering his mouth to my aching clit, he pauses to give me a final, wolfish grin. “Try not to get too wild, my love – we wouldn’t want to destroy the nest”

At first think he’s exaggerating, after all – if he’s only going to pleasure me and we’re not actually going to make love- how rambunctious can things get? But in the end he proved me wrong – we had to remake the nest.

Chapter 113 – Not Even In Our Dreams

Sinclair

When I wake, it's to the feeling of Ella's round bottom undulating against my hard cock. Her back is flush to my chest, her naked body perfectly cushioned by my much larger form on one side, and the boundary of her nest on the other.

I have no doubt I was already swollen with arousal when she roused, as sleeping beside her every night is an ever-increasing challenge, especially now that our relationship has become overtly romantic. I fell asleep with her honeyed nectar still lingering on my tongue, after yet another session of pleasuring Ella unconscious to try and pacify her wolf.

I open my eyes, tightening my arms on the sweet bundle and trying to silence the excited growls of my wolf. Such a needy little mate. He's crooning.

My Ella. Mine, mine, mine. It hasn't escaped his notice that my mouth is mere inches away from her lovely neck. So close, it would be so easy, so simply. Just one little bite.

I rumble in sympathy, pressing my lips to that special juncture where her shoulder curves up into the graceful column of her throat, but forcing myself to go no further.

This is my consolation prize. I can kiss her claiming spot all I want, I can even give it the "updated by jobnib.com" occasional nibble. maybe a frequent nibble... or a little nip.. just a tiny baby bite... NO! I quickly break myself out of the reverie, cursing Ella's delicious scent.

This is torture. My wolf complains. I can't believe the Goddess would send us a mate then refuse us the ability to claim her. It's sadistic – criminal even!

Ella, for her part, isn't making the situation any easier. The naughty creature is still rubbing her bottom suggestively against me, but she's also pretending to be asleep.

She's taking determinedly even breaths, much too intentional and heavy to compare to the gentle sighs of her usual dozing.

I've spent much more time than I'd like to admit watching this little wolf sleep, and I know an act when I see it. The nerve, I think in complete amusement. As if all her rocking and wriggling is just tossing and turning, and not a calculated assault.

"I know you're awake, trouble." I purr in her ear, quickly rewarded with a small giggle. Chuckling myself, I prop myself onto and elbow and roll Ella onto her back,

both relieved and disappointed to lose the stimulation of her lush behind.

I duck my head and claim her lips, dragging my palm down to her swollen breast as I steal the breath from her lungs. Ella moans and arches into my hand, and I drag my thumb over her beaded nipple. We carry on this way for a while, saying good morning with our bodies instead of our voices, and enjoying every last moment.

When I finally pull back, bumping her pert nose with my own, I fall headfirst into the bottomless pools of her golden eyes. “Well, imp? What do you have to say for yourself?”

“It wasn’t my fault.” The brazen thing actually bats her eyelashes at me, the very picture of innocence. “I woke up and it was practically stabbing me, what else was I supposed to do?”

In hindsight I realize she might have done much worse. If I woke up first and found Ella aroused, there are about a dozen different and completely debauched ways I would have chosen to wake her.

The possibilities are already racing through my mind: images of Ella splayed before me, whimpering in her sleep, coming before she even – Get your mind out of the gutter!

“You were supposed to wake me up so I could get things under control – not try to seduce me.” I grin, flashing my fangs so she knows I’m only half joking. Ella drops her head back and groans. “It isn’t fair.”

She complains, “you get to touch me all you want, and I never get to return the favor!” “Because I don’t trust myself not to lose control.” I remind her for the tenth time, already anticipating her usual rebuttal of: but you’re always in control. “All bets are off when it comes to you, Elia.”

Ella huffs, but peeks up at me curiously, “I was thinking.” She begins hesitantly, her slender fingers toying with the dark hair scattered over my chest.

“Mhmm?” I prompt, tracing my fingers down her tummy. “Maybe we could have more dream dates.” Ella muses hopefully. “Then we could both get some fun out of this.” I blink in surprise. “Sweetheart, do you imagine that I’m not getting fun out of this?”

“That I don’t enjoy giving you pleasure?” “No, I know you do.” Ella answers, her skin flushing bright red. “In fact I think you might enjoy it too much.” She adds ruefully, earning a laugh in reply. I know she’s been overwhelmed by my dedication to making her see stars as often and frequently as I can, but I don’t feel the least bit sorry about it. She deserves all this and more.

“But I like giving pleasure too.” She finally admits, “and I feel guilty that you never get... you know, rewarded”

I should have realized that someone as generous as Ella would want to give affection as much, if not more, than she wants to receive it, but I wasn't joking about my struggles with control. “Im sorry, baby.” I profess honestly, pressing a deep, lingering kiss to her lips. “I know it's difficult. And believe me, I wish things were different. I wish I could be buried in your sweet p-

“Dominic!” Ella exclaims, cutting me off and looking scandalized. “Tsk, poor little wolf,” I chuckle, “raised by those prudish humans.” Ella grumbles one of those adorable kittenish growls, and I mentally debate how often is too often to outrage her sweet sensibilities.

I love her blushes, and I never want to lose the ability to shock her this way. For the time being I decide that dirty talk is only going to make abstaining more difficult. “The point was that I wish I could be buried in you 24/7, but we can't” “Not even in our dreams?” Ella inquires earnestly.

“Maybe if we dream in different beds.” I concede, “ but I think it would be dangerous to try while sleeping together. If I can actually feel you in my arms, while I'm making love to you in my head... it would just be a recipe for disaster. I might even claim you while unconscious.”

Ella lowers her gaze in disappointment. “Okay, I suppose that makes sense. “It's only a few more months.” I say, hoping to offer her some comfort. “And towards the end you probably won't want me anywhere near you. You'll be so uncomfortable and ready to get this baby out of you, that you'll probably want to rip my head off just for putting it here in the first place.”

Ella frowns, and at first I think I've put my foot in my mouth. However a moment later she inquires, “Can I ask you something?” “Anything.” I agree, much too quickly. She really does have me wrapped around her little finger.

“When we first met and the doctor was worried about the baby being too small, you mentioned that your mother had been told the same when she was carrying you.” Ella reminds me thoughtfully. I hum in confirmation, and she continues.

“I've just, I've never had any women in my life to help guide me through this. I mean there's plenty of nonsense online, but a billion women arguing with each other about what's best and which experiences are accurate... it's just not the same as hearing from someone you trust. Do you know much about your mother's experience?”

I find myself smiling, my mother's beautiful face appearing in my head. “She used to tell

me that story all the time. About how all the doctors were convinced I was going to be a runt, but I proved them wrong and ended up being one of the healthiest, strongest pups they'd even seen. Every time I doubted myself, or felt like a failure, she reminded me that nothing in life ever stays the same, and you never know how a story will turn out when you're still in the thick of it."

"How old were you, when she died?" Ella questions gently, snuggling a bit closer to me, no doubt to lend her comfort.

"I was only six." I share softly. "I don't remember much about her, but I remember that story, and I remember her smile. I learned a lot of the other pieces second-hand from my father, but those memories are the ones I know are my own." Ella offers me a bittersweet smile. "Would you tell me... I mean, only if you want to, I'm just..."

"How she died?" I guess, knowing Ella is curious but reluctant to make me share a difficult story. I nod. "That seems only fair, since I've been asking you about all your traumas." "Still, you don't have to tell me unless you want to."

Ella repeats firmly. "It's okay, baby. You should know – it's only right." I take a deep breath, transporting myself back to all those years ago, and begin

Chapter 114 – Sinclair Visits the Past

Sinclair

“Hmm, where oh where could my little pup be?” My mother’s velvety voice sounds just on the other side of the cabinet where I’m hiding. I press my hands over my mouth to try and silence my giggles, but a few small sounds still escape.

“Aha!” Mom whips open the cabinets two doors down, shouting with triumph only to soften her tone into another thoughtful hum. “Not in there.” She muses aloud, and I can almost see her rubbing her chin in thought.

As she moves closer I climb along the shelves, clambering over towels and wash rags to settle in the cabinet she just searched and found empty. A shaft of light bursts into the dark cupboards as my mother pulls open the doors where I’d just been sitting, another delighted cry on her lips. She doesn’t seem disappointed to have failed again, on the contrary she sounds impressed.

Ahh, he’s a sneaky little sausage.” She observes sagely, “That’s very good. All the best hunters can track their targets as silently as a ghost.” I can hear her footsteps circling, and I know she can smell me in the room, but I’m doing my best to outsmart her.

“In fact the very best predators can sometimes trick their prey into thinking they’re the ones doing the hunting... when really they’re about to be someone’s dinner!” Her voice rises at the end as she lunges for another cupboard. It’s getting harder and harder to hide my giggles as she fails to find me, but I know she’s enjoying this just as much as I am. I shift again, crawling silently to the very last cupboard in the mansion’s huge laundry room.

“What was that!” My mother’s voice sharpens, and I can see her freezing through a small crack in the door. “Oh I wish my fierce little wolf was here to protect me! I think I’m being watched.” She frets loudly. “I certainly hope something terrible isn’t about to jump out and scare me.”

Right on cue I leap out of the cupboard with a ferocious roar, pouncing on her and toppling her right to the ground. She cries out dramatically, throwing her arm over her eyes to protect herself from the terrible sight of her attacker. “Oh no! A Vicious rogue, please don’t eat me!” She begs, “I have pups!”

“Mommy it’s me!” I laugh hysterically, trying to pull her arm away from her face. Slowly she lowers her arm, blinking down at me in surprise. “Oh Dominic, thank goodness! You’ve gotten so big and strong I didn’t even recognize you. I was sure I was a goner!”

Her shock and relief only lasts a moment, and then she sits up, a familiar spark in her green eyes. “Such a rascal – scaring me that way.” She prowls toward me, wagging her

fingers in obvious threat. I back away, my pudgy hands outstretched in preparation to ward off the imminent attack. "And you know what happens to pups who play tricks on their Mommies don't you?"

They get a visit from the tickle monster!" She lashes out and snatches me up, her hands fluttering over my tummy, tickling me mercilessly.

Within moments I'm on my back, squealing with mirth and trying to push away her hands. When I'm laughing so hard I can no longer breathe, I pounce again, putting a stop to the tickle monster's relentless assault. I'm only six, but my mother is so little that I already stand as tall as her shoulder, and I must be at least half her weight.

I flatten her to the laundry room floor, Sprawling on top of her and resting my cheek on her breast, breathing in her familiar Scent as I try to catch my breath. Her arms come around my back as I snuggle in, gentle fingers stroking my hair.

"There's my sweet boy," she murmurs, hugging me tightly. "Mommy, I'm a fierce hunter." I correct her indignantly, rolling my eyes at her silliness. There are some things Mommies just don't understand. "Deadly pred-ters are not sweet."

"Says who?" She inquires, sounding slightly affronted.. "Um, says everyone." I explain, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. "Alpha warriors don't come home from battle and run to their Mommies for cuddles. They go drink and hunt and kiss she-wolves."

"And what do you know about drinking and kissing she-wolves?" My mother counters, playfully narrowing her eyes. "Have you been sneaking out to the pub at night?" She gasps, gripping my arms. "How many wives do you have, tell me right now!"

"None!" I laugh, "I promise!" Of course, she doesn't need to know that I already have a girlfriend. Knowing how mothers worry, she'd probably overreact to learn how fast I'm growing up.

"Listen to me very carefully Dominic," Mom replies after a moment, trailing her fingertips up and down my back, "The best Alphas and the best warriors are the ones who know that fighting is a last resort. They don't do it because it's tough or manly, they do it because they have to protect their pack.

They do it for love of their family and people – nothing else." She explains sternly. "You can't ever forget that duty, or that your power is a grave responsibility. Love is not a bad word, and sweetness is not weakness – these things are your greatest strengths. You have to promise me that you never stop coming to me for cuddles no matter how old you get, that you'll never hold yourself back from showing the people in your life how much you care about them. Never lose this side of you, Dominic."

I nod, feeling the truth and conviction in her words, and secretly feeling relieved that I don't have to act like I don't care in order to be strong. I don't want to stop hugging my Mom, I just thought that it wasn't allowed in order to be a real man.

"I promise." I agree easily, thinking of my father then. He's always touching and flirting with Mommy, and always tells Roger and me how much he loves us. He makes time to play with us and read bedtime stories, and always comforts us when we're hurt or scared.

He never shames us for those feelings, even if the rest of the world makes those things seem wrong. But then again, he's the most powerful wolf in the pack, so if he can do it, it must not be wrong. Maybe it's everyone else who has things backwards.

We're still lying there when the fire alarm begins blaring. Mom sits up with me still in her arms, scenting the air. We both smell smoke at the same time, and she immediately jumps to her feet. She sets me on the ground and leads me up the stairs, her eyes scanning the manor around us with hawkish intensity.

When we reach the front hallway, with the door only a few meters away, she releases me and nudges me towards the exit. "Get outside, baby. Go straight to the guardhouse, and wait for me there."

"But what about you?" I ask anxiously, my heart pounding in my chest. "I have to find Roger." She explains, gazing towards the upper stories. "Just go sweetheart, I'll be there before you know it."

She kisses my cheek and dashes away up the stairs. I start to run outside, when I hear the sound of a cat yowling in the distance. Oh no! Pancake! I think frantically, picturing our new cat. He must be trapped!

I change directions, following the sounds of the frantic meows. They carry me deeper and deeper into the smokey house, until I can actually see the flames climbing up the outer walls. Fear slices through me, but I know Pancake is close and I can't leave him to die. I finally find the terrified animal cowering under the china cabinet in the dining room, a blazing inferno surrounding him.

The door had been closed, and there hadn't been another way out, but I still find myself scolding the young tabby. "Pancake what are you doing? Don't you know about fire alarms? They mean you have to get out!" Shaking my head, I scoop up the fluffy creature, "What are you doing in a locked room anyway?"

When I turn back to the door, I finally remember my school lessons about what to do in the event of a fire. When I opened the door I'd let a bunch of air in, feeding the riotous flames. A wall of fire is blocking the door, and all I can do is tuck Pancake inside my

shirt, and hope I'm fast enough.

I sprint forward and leap through the flames, batting out sparks that linger in my hair on the other side. I'm choking and coughing, and belatedly remember to crawl on the ground where there's more oxygen.

I'm still crawling along on one hand, using the other to hold Pancake still, when I hear my mother's frantic screams. "Dominic!" She cries, Dominic where are you!"

"Mommy!" I call back, suddenly seeing her ahead of me. She has a wet rag pressed to her mouth, and her eyes are wide with terror. "Dominic! What are you doing, I told you to get out!"

She scolds, running towards me. "I had to save Pancake! I cry, holding up the petrified feline. Mom's expression softens, "Oh, of course! Poor pancake" She takes my hand and begins leading me out. "Come on, now, we have to go."

My heart eases now that my Mom is here. I'm still scared, but I know I'm safe as long as she's here. I don't know how the fire started, but it's amazing how quickly the flames consumed the house.

Everywhere I look is black with smoke and suffocating heat. I've never felt anything like it. I feel like my skin might blister just from being in the same room with the fire.

We're almost to the entryway when there's a horrible rumbling and cracking sound above us, and before I understand what's happening, I'm being thrown forward through the air. An explosion rocks the mansion as I crash into the ground, and when I turn back I understand what's happened. The ceiling caved in behind me, but Mommy is still trapped on the other side.

She must have used all of her strength to toss me out of harm's way, even knowing she would probably end up stuck. I can barely see her through the flames, only her glowing green eyes remain. I wonder if she might shift, but I know better – highly flammable fur is not any protection from a fire. "Go!

Dominic!" She shouts through the whirring conflagration.

"No," I yell, horrified. "I won't leave you!

"Go now!" Power rolls off of her in powerful waves, carrying an authority I'm not yet strong enough to defy. I don't have a choice. My feet are moving without my consent, even as tears pour down my tear-stained cheeks. "No, Mommy No!"

"It's okay, baby." She cries, and I can hear tears in her voice. "This is the way it

should be. It's okay." She insists again. "I love you! Remember who you are!"

I've barely stepped clear of the inferno when the entire house collapses in on itself, sending a black mushroom cloud into the sky. Firefighters and guards are surging around me, pulling me to safety, but I hear nothing but my own screams for my mother – even though I know there's no point.

She's gone.

Chapter 115 – A New It Couple Emerges

EllaTears are streaming down Sinclair's face as he relives his Mother's death, and I'm doing my best not to burst into outright sobs. My heart aches for the little boy he once was, and for the burden he obviously still carries today. Hearing this story, I understand that his last conversation with his mother had truly stayed with him over the years, shaping him into the man before me now.

"Afterwards, I leaned that she'd gotten Roger out of the house only to realize that I wasn't there."

Sinclair Continues, wiping his eyes. "She ran back in to get me, even though the guards tried to stop her." Sinclair relates, "So you see, that's why Roger always blamed me... he wasn't wrong. If I'd listened to her the first time, if I'd gone outside when she told me to, she would still be alive now."

"But Pancake wouldn't." I remind him thickly. The corners of his mouth quirk up, "It was almost thirty years ago, baby. Pancake is long gone."

"You know what I mean" I chide him. "And your mother understood because you were doing exactly what she was trying to teach you – to protect those more vulnerable than yourself."

"I know." He confesses. "I spent years in therapy, Just trying to come to terms with the fact that it was her choice. I was a child and couldn't have understood the danger, and she didn't have to come after me."

"But she was your mother, it wasn't even a question for her." I murmur, twining my limbs with his so he can feel my solid weight in his arms. "She wanted you to live much more than she cared about her own survival."

He nods wordlessly, his eyes still distant, as if he hasn't truly returned to the present. "I understand that, but sometimes I still think that if it wasn't for me, she never would have needed to make a choice in the first place. My decision that day took her from Dad and Roger and the pack."

"Did you ever find out how the fire started?" I ask softly, running my fingers through the dark, thick locks of his hair.

"In the weeks after the fire, it became clear that it was arson." Sinclair explains hoarsely. "Dad was away on pack business, and it was well known that Mom was home with the pups. We were never able to prove it, but we always suspected the attack was political. King Xavier was on the throne then, and my father was his right hand and next in line. All the politics that are playing out today – they were already under way back then."

“You think it was the King – the current one, I mean?” I inquire. Sinclair sighs, his emotions less potent now that we’ve moved on to politics. “The problem with being the biggest and baddest wolf around is that it puts a colossal target on your back. And the worse thing is that you’re so hard to kill and people are often so afraid of taking you on directly, that they go after your family instead.” Sinclair shares. “It might not be as effective as killing you, but Alphas who lose their mate and pups rarely recover fully.”

Sinclair pauses to nuzzle my neck and caress my belly, as if reminding himself that Rafe and I are safe. “It could have been anyone, but I actually think Xavier is a more likely suspect than the current king – my father was younger and not quite strong enough yet to rule, but it was clear he would be soon. Xavier didn’t have heirs and though he still had a lot of time left to try and make them, I think the writing was already on the wall. My father was too strong and too well liked.”

“Dominic, if it was arson then it wasn’t your decision that took your mother, it was Xavier’s, or whoever was responsible. It wasn’t some tragic accident, it was murder.” I argue, hating the guilt still dominating my mate’s expression.

He gazes down at me tenderly. “You don’t have to worry, Ella. I’m okay – I forgave myself a long time ago.”

“But Dominic, there’s nothing to forgive.” I insist, near tears again. “It wasn’t your fault.” I pull back far enough to look into his emerald eyes. “I can tell you right now, that if it came down to me or Rafe, I would choose him every time – even tiny as he is. And I wouldn’t ever want him to think that my sacrifice wasn’t worth it, or to blame himself”

“Shhh,” Sinclair tucks my head under his chin, stroking my spine. “It’s okay, little wolf. I know.”

“Stop comforting me! I’m supposed to be comforting you.” I complain. Trying and failing to wriggle free. “You are.” Sinclair lies – the rat. “It comforts me just holding you this way.”

Settling, I decide to change tactics. “Do you have any idea how proud your mother would be, if she could see you today?” I ask him softly, hoping to help ease his pain but speaking with complete honesty. “You became exactly the man she hoped you would. You never lost sight of what matters most, even when the whole world was working against you. You lead with love instead of fear, and you don’t confuse strength with cruelty.”

“Now you’re just flattering me.” Sinclair rumbles with amusement. “I’m not.” I bite back. “Do you remember when we first met, and you still thought I was a scheming gold digger?”

“Oh yes, I’m sure that would have made my mother very proud.” Sinclair jokes.

“When you realized you were wrong, you owned up to your mistake.” I continue determinedly. “And when you saw I was hurting, your first instinct was to hug me. You

didn’t even think about it. I remember being so shocked, because here was this huge, terrifying predator – and you held me more gently and with more compassion than anyone in my entire life.”

A pleased purr vibrates beneath my hands. “You make me sound like my father, that’s exactly how I used to think of him. He could go from being a grizzly to a teddy bear in the blink of an eye.”

“Exactly.” I confirm. “I wish you could see yourself the way I do, Dominic. If you could, you’d know I’m not just trying to pump up your ego – which, for the record, I wouldn’t do because it’s already big enough.” I quip, yelping when Sinclair pinches my bottom.

“I’m telling you how proud your mother would be, because I believe it with every fiber of my being.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Sinclair professes, kissing me. I eagerly return the gesture, tilting my head to give him full reign of my mouth, and pressing my curves closer to his hard body.

We’re just starting to get carried away when a knock sounds at the door, and Hugo’s reluctant voice floats through the wood. “Alpha, it’s urgent.”

Sinclair reluctantly extracts himself from my arms, and strides to the door, as naked as the day he was born. I hide my own nudity beneath the covers, burrowing deeper into my nest as the Beta stalks into the room, not batting an eye at the scene awaiting him.

Instead he goes straight to the TV console against the far wall, clicking the remote and bringing the screen to life. He flips the channels until the device lands on a breaking news report.

An image of Lydia and the Prince appears in the top left frame of a news report, above a headline reading: No longer in mourning? The Prince spotted in Old Town with former

Moon Valley Luna, Lydia Sinclair. My jaw drops, and my brain scrambles to piece together the implications of this news.

I'm momentarily distracted by the way the reporters identified Lydia using Sinclair's name, feeling a rush of indignance for this slight. I pull the sheets from the bed, wrapping them around my body and moving to Sinclair's side. He tucks me under his arm as Hugo increases the volume on the television.

"Mere weeks after the unspeakable tragedy of the Princess Angeline's murder, her widower and political candidate Prince Damon was seen out and about with Moon Valley's former Luna. When asked for a comment, the pair reported that they are just friends, sharing that Lydia stepped forward to offer the Prince comfort in his time of need – being no stranger to tragedy herself.

Despite the platonic nature of their relationship, onlookers could help but notice how cozy the couple appeared, with many expressing hope that the prominent she-wolf can offer the grieving Prince solace at this difficult time. Are we witnessing a new it

couple in the making? Is Lydia's friendship with the Prince going to throw off Dominic Sinclair's campaign? And where is the Moon Valley Alpha and his new mate Ella? The pair haven't been seen publicly in weeks, and speculation is brewing. All this and more, when we return."

"Turn it off." Sinclair rumbles, exhaling when the Screen goes dark again. The three of us exchange worried glances as the sound disappears, and I can tell we're all thinking the same thing. "What the actual fuck?"

Chapter 116 – Reeling

Ella

Hugo, Sinclair and I are all staring at the television with wide eyes and slack jaws, unable to process the images flitting across the screen. It seems like every time we manage to take a few steps forward, Lydia and the Prince find a way to send us reeling back – and this is no exception.

“This doesn’t make any sense.” Hugo expresses, obviously overwhelmed. “Why would he risk losing the pack’s sympathy by parading around another Woman so soon after his wife’s death?”

“Trust me, Hugo – Damon isn’t the one calling the shots here. This is all Lydia.”

Sinclair states gruffly. “She’s going to force her way onto the throne one way or another. Right now she’s playing the doting friend, but mark my words, by the time the election ends she’ll be in his bed.”

“How bad is this?” I ask, looking up at Sinclair’s handsome face, “Does she have information that could hurt you?”

Sinclair Squeezes my shoulders, “She knows some secrets.” He relates, “but luckily nothing I could imagine as a smoking gun. In fact most of what she knows would be more harmful to the Prince things like my father’s attack, Things the public believes

were accidents but our private investigators proved malicious.” His mouth flattens into a hard line. “The real danger is that she knows how we think, how we operate. Not to mention that the Prince doesn’t have more than two brain cells to rub together, but Lydia has plenty.”

“So what do we do?” I ask anxiously, my head replaying the news reel over and over again. “My bed rest isn’t common knowledge, and they’re making it sound like my absence from the public eye is suspicious. Do we tell everyone about my condition?

Or do we make an appearance?”

“I’m afraid making an appearance might play right into their hands. This could be some sort of attempt to lure us out of hiding.” Hugo advises, looking very grim indeed.

In the distance I hear the front door open and close – a fact which comes as quite a surprise, since my hearing has never been so sharp before. Wheels roll over the door jam, and then Henry’s voice floats up toward us, “Good Morning!”

“Henry!” I exclaim, both taken aback yet unsurprised we stayed in bed so long. Sinclair’s

father has been coming over almost every day since we agreed to be invalids together, and he's been an invaluable help, since I learned my true identity.

I grab some loungewear and disappear into the restroom to change. I might be a wolf, but my human modesty is too deeply ingrained to allow me to strut around nude the way Sinclair does – and I'm definitely not changing in front of Hugo.

When I emerge, Sinclair is also dressed, though much more formally than I am.

We go downstairs together, Sinclair carrying me despite my protests. My blood pressure is improving more and more every day, but it isn't enough to free me of bed rest yet. We all gather around the breakfast table, the men analyzing these recent developments in low, serious voices, and me feeling like an outsider eavesdropping on matters I can't begin to understand. It's not that they exclude me, I just feel so out of my depth.

"What do you think, Ella?" Sinclair asks, turning his blazing emerald eyes to me. They've been going around in circles for more than half an hour, debating how we should respond to this crisis.

I gnaw on my lower lip thoughtfully, trying to ignore the flash of emotion in Sinclair's eye as he observes the nervous habit. Releasing my swollen lip, I sigh, "Do we ever know what happened with Lydia's husband? I mean the Princess is dead, but Lydia's still married to some other Alpha, right?" I clarify. When the men nod, I continue.

"Where is he in all this? Even if he doesn't want her anymore, it must make him look bad for her to be gallivanting around another territory with another Alpha."

"That's a good point." Henry praises, maintaining a straight-faced expression which reassures me that he's not giving out false compliments. "Maybe we've been going about this the wrong way."

Instead of trying to understand their motivations, we can simply leave it at knowing they're corrupt and respond without playing into their hands.

After all, they'll be expecting some sort of countermove to challenge the media's narrative, but we might be able to spin ourselves out of the hot seat and refocus the attention onto them – where it belongs."

"Keep them busy and distract the pack by rustling up her husband and causing drama" Hugo nods approvingly. "Good idea, Ella."

Sinclair squeezes my hand in support, but when I look over, his features are still drawn with worry." I still don't like it. I think it's the best hope we have, but something about this entire situation just doesn't seem right."

"Well of course not." Hugo scoffs, "You don't need to convene a blue-ribbon committee to tell you this is all fucked six ways to Sunday." "No, I mean, I feel like I'm missing something."

Sinclair replies drying. "There's something bothering me and I just can't put my finger on it." "Well, you've been saying from the beginning that Princess Angeline's death felt off –

like a political scheme." I contribute softly. "Right, but one the Prince is too unimaginative to have orchestrated." Hugo confirms.

Sinclair's eyes widen almost imperceptibly, and then he clenches them shut, closing his hand into a fist and swearing up a storm. "What?" "You know who isn't too unimaginative?" Sinclair growls, scanning our concerned faces.

"Lydia." Henry supplies easily. "And while Prince Damon might have seen his mate as little more than a trophy, he's not the type to impulsively destroy one of his prized possessions. But Lydia wouldn't have any reservations about getting the Princess out of the way."

"Are you saying what I think you are?" I gape, both certain I've understood and yet unable to believe my ears..

"As crazy as it seems, what other explanation do we have?" Sinclair inquires, rising to his feet and pacing back and forth behind the dining table. "If the Prince had lost his temper and beat her to death, I wouldn't question it. And if there was some sort of violent attack, you could make the case for rogues or vengeance for some slight committed by Damon. But poison? That's a woman's weapon."

"True, and if it was a political scheme you would think the royal family would have staged her death and spun the details in a way that benefitted the campaign beyond Damon looking sympathetic."

Henry agrees. "Instead it just seems... odd." "Exactly." Sinclair confirms. "If it was planned, then why haven't they jumped on the golden opportunity to lay blame and cast aspersions? Why haven't the Prince and his son been parading their grief around Moon Valley for all to see?" He gesticulates, getting more and more enthused now.

"I don't think anyone in the palace knew this was coming. I think Lydia got rid of her competition and slid into the role of 'concerned friend' in order to ingratiate herself to the Prince." "You really think Lydia would go to that length?"

Hugo asks skeptically. "Don't forget the way she played my sons for so many years." Henry cuts in, his low voice as harsh as I've ever heard it. "Lydia is a cunning she-wolf

who proved herself willing to do anything for power. And if she can ruin her fated mate's life without a shred of remorse, I guarantee she won't have qualms about ruining others."

Sinclair looks ready to argue with the idea that his life is ruined, but this isn't the time.

"Okay, so let's say all this is true," I suggest, trying and failing to wrap my brain around the idea that anyone could be so calculating and cruel. "What does it mean for the campaign?"

"It means that we have some decent ammunition to use against the Prince and Lydia."

Hugo assesses simply. "But surely we have to be careful about using it?" I question. "I mean they need to look like they're in this together, otherwise the story becomes heartless bitch takes advantage of grieving widower.' If we play this wrong the Prince could end up looking even more sympathetic than before"

"That's a good point." Sinclair acknowledges, the corner of his mouth twitching at my made-up headline. "And you'd better believe that Lydia is going to have plenty of dirty tricks up her sleeve.

We might have figured a few things out, but if we're right it means things are even more complicated than before."

"So what's our move?" Henry presses, watching his son with the expression of a proud father wolf who knows his pup already has the answer. First things first, we track down Lydia's husband and encourage him to remind the realm that she isn't the concerned citizen she seems." Sinclair decides firmly.

"Second, we quietly get proof that she was behind the Princess's death, even if we don't plan to use it, we need to know for sure.

Finally, we make sure the pack remembers exactly what kind of mate the Prince was to his wife. He might not be guilty of her murder, but he's certainly guilty of other crimes against her and the people need to see what he calls protection and caring."

"And us?" I ask anxiously, looking up at my mate. Sinclair offers me a grim smile, "We sit tight, focus on keeping our pup and your wolf safe inside you, and hope we don't have to do anything desperate ourselves."

Chapter 117 – Ella Asks Henry for Advice

When Sinclair and Hugo finally leave for the pack headquarters, Henry and I move into our favorite sitting room, returning to the puzzle we began solving together earlier this week. Seated across from the older wolf, I pretend to scan the scattered puzzle pieces for matches, while really sneaking peeks up at him. “So what do you make of all this?”

I ask curiously. “Lydia and the Prince?” Henry grimaces, “I never liked that woman. But trying to argue with headstrong young Alphas’ convinced they’ve found their mate is like beating your head against a wall.”

He offers me a tender smile. “You’ll see soon enough. You can do everything in your power to try and teach your pups the important lessons and prepare them for the real world – but at the end of the day you have to let them make their own mistakes – it’s the only way they learn.”

“Does it ever hurt any less? Or get any easier to watch them go down the wrong path?” I inquire softly.

“Not a damn bit.” Henry shares grimly. However despite his grim look, his eyes sparkle when he looks over at me. “Luckily, that doesn’t seem to be despite his grim look, his eyes sparkle when he looks over at me. “Luckily, that doesn’t seem to be a problem for me anymore. Lydia is out of the picture, my boys are friends again for the first time since losing their mother, and Dominic is on his way to being King.”

“Dominic just told me how his mother died this morning.” I confess, reaching for the old wolf’s gnarled hand. “Im so sorry you went through that.

It must have been terrible for you to be left alone with a pack to rule and two young boys to raise on your own, in the midst of all your grief.”

He nods, “looking back I don’t have the first idea how I survived it. The grief almost destroyed me... and I’m ashamed to say I let it destroy Dominic and Roger’s relationship.” Henry sighs. “I haven’t always been the best father, but I can tell you right now that it was a hell of a lot easier to be one when I had my mate.”

I know what he means. When I thought I was going to be bringing this baby into the world alone, I’d been terrified. Very few people who plan for children expect to end up alone with the responsibility, and though I’d been one of the rare few – it certainly hadn’t been by choice. I was thrilled to finally succeed, but the stakes seemed a thousand times higher without a partner.

I’m still afraid of course, but it feels so much better to be part of a team. I know that as long as Sinclair is alive, I will always have someone to lean on and my pup will have two loving parents to guide him through the world.

"I never Would have believed I could do it without her, and I'm proud that I managed..." Henry continues, his mouth a quavering line. "but I will never stop being haunted by the knowledge that the wrong parent died... they would have been so much better off if Juliet had been here instead of me."

"Please don't say that." I beg, feeling tears in my eyes for the second time in as many hours. "Why not? It's true." Henry shrugs, his dark eyes shining. "There's no use denying it or letting ego get in the way. You'll see that too – nothing humbles you like being a parent."

My mind scrambles for an argument, not because I want to invalidate his feelings, but because I know in my heart that losing any parent is never the answer. "Has Dominic ever told you about his last conversation with Juliet?" I finally ask, "before the fire started, before everything went wrong?"

Henry thinks for a moment, "No, not that I can recall." Slowly, careful to get the details right, I repeat the story Sinclair shared with me this morning. Dominic's mother gave him permission to ignore what society dictated," I summarize at the end."

But he already had the example you provided to guide him. He was only six, and he might always have remembered those words because they were her last, but he lived them because of you. He is the Alpha he is today because of you. Because you showed him every day how to walk the walk."

"You know that all happened right here?" Henry inquires thoughtfully, his expression far off as he looks around the room. "I moved the boys to a new home after the fire. But when Dominic grew up and made his fortune, he rebuilt the original manor in her honor."

"I didn't know," I admit, looking around the huge mansion. "Was it always this grand?"

Henry chuckles. "It was even grander in my day – Dominic isn't the only one who did well for himself, you know."

"I know." I laugh, snatching up a distinctive puzzle piece belonging to my current focus area. But I think I got us distracted. I was asking you about Lydia."

"Darling, when you have all day, diversions are a blessing, not a curse." Henry advises warmly, patting the arms of his wheelchair. "The first year I was in this chair, I would have begged for a lovely young she-wolf to distract me from the monotony."

"And now I feel like you might be distracting me intentionally." I remark slyly. Henry chuckles again, but it's the defeated laugh of a man who knows the game is up. "Oh Ella, you are too clever for your own good, you know that?"

Just tell me, Henry.” I request gently. “Whatever is worrying you can’t be as painful as reliving your mate’s death.”

His brows arch and he flashes his fangs in agreement. “It’s just that I’ve seen this film before” He finally admits. “I’ve seen what happens when there’s this kind of competition for the throne, and it never ends well for anyone.”

“Isn’t it always like this?” I inquire, not caring that I might be showing my ignorance of shifter politics.

“No, it isn’t.” Henry explains. “Normally the Alphas of each pack in the union are pretty evenly matched. They battle it out on the campaign trail, the people vote and the Alpha’s who don’t get enough points return to their council duties. The problem is when you have a few extremely strong Alphas competing at the top, forcing all the pack Alpha’s to choose sides and form alliances rather than competing themselves. It focuses all the pressure and all the danger on the one or two men who actually stand to win.”

“So when there are lots of wolves in the running, they’re so busy keeping an eye on all their opponents that they can’t afford to zero in on anyone in particular. But when there are only a few, it results in all the stuff we’ve been facing?” I question, searching for clarity. “The assassination attempts and death threats?”

“Yes.” Henry confirms. “And the divisions are worse because Dominic and the Prince are two very different animals. The Prince has the edge for being the King’s heir. He has wealth and a clear willingness to throw thousands of ordinary wolves under the bus to benefit his friends. He’s famously corrupt, and everyone knows he can be bought for the right price. For a certain type of person, that’s a very tempting type of King to place in power.”

“But Dominic is the exact opposite.” I realize slowly. “So those same people who would benefit if the Prince wins, suddenly stand to lose in a big way if an honest, incorruptible wolf takes control.”

Henry nods. “You’re starting to see now. Dominic views all this as the fight between good vs evil, and in some ways he’s right.”

“But in others?” I press, feeling my heart beat faster with every word we speak. “The world isn’t split up into angels and devils, Ella” Henry sighs, “it’s full of complicated and flawed individuals with a thousand different motives guiding them forward.”

“I thought.. it sounded like the united packs and the Alpha council want stability over everything else though.” I object, rubbing my, suddenly aching, neck. “Yes, but

what is stability?" Henry challenges.

Dominic believes it's peace, but there are a lot of people out there who see it as preserving the status quo; ensuring that those currently in power remain in power to avoid constant turnover in leadership." "Why are you telling me all this?" I ask, my mouth suddenly feeling very dry.

"Because I know my son, I know the way he talks." Henry answers seriously. "Dominic grew up in this world and he's suffered the harsh realities it creates. He understands all this even if he doesn't make it explicit. But you're not from this world, and I want to make sure you know what you're truly up against."

"You're saying that I shouldn't assume we're going to win." I assess shakily. "I need to be realistic about the possibility that we'll lose."

"Yes, Ella." Henry confirms sorrowfully. "I hate to say it, but the more we learn about your past, about Lydia's schemes and all the chaos that has happened in between. this is feeling less and less like a journey to the top, and more like a bomb waiting to explode." My hand gravitates protectively towards my belly. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Henry reaches for me, looking worried now. "I'm sorry, dear one. Should I have kept my mouth shut?" "No." I breathe, trying to calm my gag reflex. "I needed to know. And now that I do -I can start to prepare."

Chapter 118 – Ella Takes a Stand

Ella

I've been replaying my conversation with Henry all day long, repeating the exchange over and over in my mind and trying to decipher if the old Alpha was trying to want me as a mere precaution, or because he really believes we have something to be worried about. After Henry left this evening I got online and started looking into the actual mechanics of the election – something I should have done from the very beginning.

It all looks fairly simple on paper. All eligible Alphas compete in the public arena and all the shifters in the realm vote on election day. This usually results in two or three frontrunners, and the Alpha council makes its selection based on the remaining competitors. If there's a wide margin and a clear winner, they usually just reinforce the popular Vote, but when there are ties or controversies, they provide an important check on the system.

Once elected, the Alpha King will remain in power until they die, coronate one of their heirs, or are removed from power by council decree.

Historically elections are actually very rare, because most King's belong to an existing dynasty and pass down the title through the generations of their children. As I'm reading, I discover that the current King is the only the third ruler in history to ever be removed from power, and his own election five years ago was the first in 200 years.

The fact that the wolves are already having another Vote is absolutely unprecedented. The knot in my stomach tightens as all this information comes together. I realize that Henry was right to warn me, after all. "What are you frowning at so intently, trouble?"

Sinclair inquires, striding out of the bathroom and ruffling his wet hair with a towel. Another Swath of terry cloth is slung around his hips, and water drips down his bare torso. My mouth waters as I take in the sight of his rippling muscles and powerful physique, but the heavy weight in my stomach is preventing my inner wolf from getting too distracted.

"Dominic, what will happen if we lose the campaign?" I inquire hesitantly, still sitting in bed with the computer in my lap. Sinclair's face pulls into a grimace, and he crosses the distance between us, peeking at my screen.

Seeing a dozen tabs worth of dry political research open in my browser, he slides his hand around my nape, massaging my tense muscles. "Doing some research?"

"Yes." I confirm gravely. "And I have to admit, I'm worried." He sits on the edge of the

bed, still cradling my head in his oversized hand. “What’s bothering you most?” “I just feel like everything is getting more confusing and out of hand every day.” I share.

Your father explained a little of the history to me, and when I stop and think about all the secrets, conspiracies and crises that keep popping up.. it’s hard not to feel like something seriously sketchy is going on. I’m beginning to feel like a pawn in some game I didn’t even know I was playing.” Sinclair pauses, his hands stilling on my body.

Am I making you feel that way?” “No, not you.” I assure him, closing the laptop and sliding closer to Sinclair. “But I also don’t know who is pulling the strings here. I feel like we’re being swept up in something much bigger than us, and it scares me.” Sinclair nods in understanding, “I’m scared too.”

He admits, shocking me. “You are?” I squeak, scooting even closer and practically climbing on top of him. Sinclair purrs and pulls me all the way into his lap.

“Of course I am. I have a lot to lose.” He proclaims soberly, squeezing me tightly so that I know he’s talking about Rafe and me. “But that’s not a bad thing. It’s a constant reminder about what’s really important. It helps me keep our family safe and pushes me to take precautions I might not otherwise.

It’s the reason I can’t accept defeat in It’s strangely comforting to hear this huge Alpha confessing his own fears. On one hand it should terrify me to know that he doesn’t feel as indomitable as he always seems, but I like knowing that I’m not alone in this – that I’m not just being silly or cowardly.

I understand that you have to approach the campaign as if losing is not an option.” I tell him, moving to straddle his thighs and take his face in my hands. I stare up into his fierce green eyes, brushing my thumbs over the layer of scruff covering his stony jaw.

“But it is a possibility, and I need to prepare for that. I need to know what to expect, I need to know the plan.”

Sinclair exhales heavily, his hands clenching and unclenching on my waist. His rugged mouth is set in a hard line, and I quickly see that he doesn’t want to add to my fears by putting new possibilities in my head. “You must have one. You’re too smart not to prepare for the worst case, even if you don’t plan on letting it come to pass.”

He drops his head to the crook of my neck, breathing in my scent and rumbling deep in his chest. “If I lose the campaign..” He begins slowly, his voice like gravel in my ear. “It will all depend on how fast the Prince moves, and where we are when it happens.”

Sinclair doesn’t say any more, and I nudge his head up, forcing him to look me in

the eye again. But you must have some idea -“

“Ella, I have dozens of contingency plans in place.” Sinclair interrupts, sounding as though he’s run out of patience. “I have plans for getting you out of the territory while I stay behind, I have plans for us being exiled together, for my imprisonment, my death, your capture. If you can think of it, I have a plan for it, sweetheart. But we don’t know how this is going to play out yet, and I can’t tell you which plan we’re going to need if the worst happens.”

My lower lip quivers dangerously, and I can’t help the fresh bloom of hurt that blossoms in my chest. “Why didn’t you tell me you were this worried? I thought we agreed that I can’t avoid danger if I don’t know it exists.”

Sinclair takes a deep breath, appearing to calm himself. “All Alphas have plans like this, Ella.” He explains. “Whether Or not there is a campaign, Alphas always have targets on their backs. I had these plans for Linda when we were married, and I have my men drafting new plans as the situation develops.”

“Oh.” I murmur, my pain easing a little. “So you just didn’t consult me.” “Baby, I don’t even know all the plans.” Sinclair counters. “These are emergency scenarios which our guards spend countless hours developing and memorizing. I notify them every time a new threat or vulnerability develops, and they build it into their equations.”

This makes sense, but my bullshit barometer is still flashing red in my mind. “But you must know the most likely ones – you must have directed your men about how to care for the baby and me if you can’t be there to protect us yourself?”

“Yes.” Sinclair concedes, lifting me off of him and rising to his feet. He’s pacing now, giving off the feral energy of a caged animal. “And I didn’t tell you because I’m already going out of my fucking mind with worry about all this! I can’t stand thinking about these possibilities myself, so I certainly didn’t want to frighten you with them too.”

”He glances at me regretfully, raw emotion blazing in his brilliant irises. “I couldn’t stand the idea of looking you in the eye and telling you I might not be able to protect you and this baby the way I’ve promised I always will.”

My heart softens, and not for the first time, I realize just how much stress Sinclair is under. Moreover, I realize just how much he downplays his own anxieties and fears in order to prioritize mine. “Listen to me, Dominic. I know you have your Alpha pride and you get to make the rules and all that other nonsense.”

I summarize impudently, climbing out of bed and approaching the big wolf. “But I also know Lunas are supposed to share their mate’s burdens and soothe them when they’re being impossible and stubborn. We know I’m not just some weak human now. I can

handle more than you're giving me credit for."

The corner of Sinclair's mouth twitches, and I whip my pointer finger toward him in warning, "It's time you let me help you." I declare imperiously, notching my chin up. "So tell me what I can do to make you feel better, and I'll do it."

As I glare up at Sinclair, I suddenly realize that I might have bitten off more than I can chew. His eyes are glowing now, and his fangs extended. His scent has deepened and grown even richer, and all of a sudden I find my body hitched up against his.

The finger I'd been pointing at him is now trapped in his powerful fist, and the breath is wrenched from my lungs as his growl washes over me. "You know the problem with all this, little wolf?"

He asks, sending shivers of delight down my spine. "When I told you she-wolves soothed their mates, I didn't mean they did it with kind words and cuddles. What I need is to feel in control even though the world around me is falling apart. What I need is to calm the wolf clawing his way out beneath my skin, rabid with the need to claim his mate"

I gulp, feeling my own wolf roll right over and expose her soft underbelly to him. "Well,

Chapter 119 – Ella Panics

Ella

The next thing I know, Sinclair is prowling forward across the room, backing me towards the bed. He seems barely human, barely in control of his wolf – but I understand now why he hasn't sought more comfort from me. I'd gotten so used to his sultry innuendos and dark promises that I forgot how serious these matters truly are to wolves. But now I see the truth. I pushed him, forced him to admit things he was trying to shield me from, then challenged his authority, demanded that he let me do my job.

My inner wolf is a veritable basket case. She's both excited and intimidated, thrilled and daunted, eager to please and utterly defiant about the idea of submitting to anyone – even Sinclair. For weeks now she's been begging for Sinclair's mark, and now that the ridiculous creature is about to get it –

she wants to play hard to get. The backs of my knees collide with the bed, and Sinclair lifts me as though I weigh nothing, tossing me back into the plush comfort of my nest.

I scramble onto my hands and knees, baring my teeth at the bossy wolf and emitting a soft growl. I don't appreciate him messing up the safe cocoon I created for our pup, and though something deep down inside of me is quivering with appreciation for his dominance, I don't care for his high-handed behavior.

Sinclair unslings the towel still wrapped around his waist, an ominous chuckle on his lips. "Such a fierce little mate." He observes, his eyes hooded with desire. "Have you already forgotten how desperate you've been to bare my mark?"

I narrow my eyes as he crawls onto the bed, climbing over the overabundance of pillows and blankets. He lashes out and catches my ankle, deftly sliding my legs out from under me and pulling me towards him over the mattress. I yelp in surprise, but the next thing I know "updated by jobnib.com" I'm on my back with Sinclair looming over me, blissfully naked. My eyes scan his chiseled form: from his glorious bronze skin, which glistens in the low light; to his devilishly handsome face; and all the way down to the huge, hard member between his legs.

Suddenly I find myself stretching out so he can appreciate my curves, shifting and writhing against the silken sheets. It's as if the mere sight of this man was able to steal my sanity, to make me forget my resolve to make him work for his prize.

"There she is." Sinclair croons, extending a single claw and dragging it down the front of my top, only deep enough to tear the thin fabric without touching my delicate flesh.

"All fire and feistiness until you get a peek of something you like." I gasp, feeling another flash of indignance even as heat pools low in my belly. His claws eviscerate my

sweatpants as well, and now I'm naked before him.

His ravenous gaze travels every inch of my exposed skin, and his pupils dilate with unbridled lust. "I have to say I know the feeling." He croons. It should be a crime to be so gorgeous."

His compliments make me preen and show off even more. I don't understand why I'm behaving this way, but my wolf is calling the shots now. I rise up onto my knees, sliding my hands up his bare chest and nibbling his pecs. I planned on kissing him once I reached his mouth, fantasized about dragging him down to the bed and making him forget his own name.

Then one of Sinclair's powerful fists forms a handhold in my hair, and he tilts my head back, holding me captive. His free hand trails down to the curve of my belly, settling over our pup. "Im not going to claim you, Ella." He rumbles, sternly and a needy whine escapes my lips. Sinclair's lips graze mine as he speaks, his eyes boring into my oWn, absorbing every ounce of my frustration and desire.

"But I am going to take you up on your offer." He informs me huskily. "Im going to take control, Ella. And if you test me, I will treat you exactly how I would treat any other naughty she- wolf." He proclaims, softening his tone but not his hold. "I need you to promise you'll tell me if I cross a line."

"And if I said you already have?" I challenge, not meaning a word of it, but wanting to see how far I can push him.

"Then Id remind you that I can smell your arousal." Sinclair purrs, sliding the hand on my tummy between my legs. His thick fingers immediately sink into the wetness soaking my cleft, and I can barely restrain my moan of delight." And your mischief," Sinclair adds, knocking his nose against mine, "and your fear."

I snap my teeth at him, feeling wilder and more fearless than I can ever remember being. Sinclair only chuckles, removing his fingers from my aching s3x – despite my outrage. "So that's the way it's going to be, hmm?"

It wouldn't be true control if you didn't have to take it. My wolf answers in my head, apparently not quite ballsy enough to speak to Sinclair directly.

Seriously? I demand. You brazen little – Hey, don't slut shame me. She answers indignantly. There's nothing wrong with knowing what you want and going after it.

Excuse me, but do you actually know what you want? I silently scoff. One moment you're provoking him and the next you're writhing around under him like a cat in

heat.

Hey, don't call me a cat – that's offensive. She snipes. Besides, It's all part of the game, silly. I can practically hear her rolling her eyes. You'll see. He needs this, and so do I. That's easy for you to say. I complain. You're writing checks but my ass is the one who has to cash them.

Don't act like you were some shrinking violet before you found out about me, she accuses. You were getting yourself in trouble long before you knew your true nature.

Forcing myself back into the present, I realize that Dominic has been watching the emotions flitting across my face, waiting for me to respond.

Amusement is clear in his wolfish smirk, but he doesn't show me any mercy. "What's the matter, baby? Your wolf giving you trouble?" His strong hands are moving over my naked form, caressing me almost reverently, even as he taunts me.

This time my wolf does respond for me, "No, I've simply changed my mind." I reply with a sniff. "I don't want your mark anymore. I think I'll go out and try to find a different mate instead. One who's not afraid to claim what's his."

Horror floods me as I realize what I've just said, and suddenly Sinclair's hands are anything but reverent. He rotates his neck as if he's having to physically force his instincts down, and when he returns his gaze to me, he looks absolutely lethal. "Well in that case, I'll just have to make sure you can't get away."

Sinclair pounces, and the next thing I know, I'm flat on my back on the bed. His mouth crashes into mine, and from then on the only sounds I make are whimpers and moans. I know this is just the beginning. I know I pushed Sinclair so far that he's going to find some diabolically sexy way of punishing me, and Goddess help me, but I can't wait. I slide my arms and legs around him, holding his body to mine as he steals kiss after kiss. When my lips are swollen and red, he moves on, kissing, licking and nipping his way over my jaw and down my neck.

I rock my hips into his, thinking how incredibly easy it would be to slide myself onto his hardness right now. After all, there's nothing between our bodies anymore, and my slickness is already coating his thick shaft from all our grinding. I try to lift my hips high enough to hook his tip inside my channel, but Sinclair realizes what I'm doing and clamps his hands around my hips, forcing them back down.

Sinclair shakes his head, sounding amused but also as though he's barely clinging to his own self-control. "Such a bad girl." He admonishes, leaving the soft spot behind my ear. Sinclair's fangs graze my sensitive earlobe, followed shortly by the deep vibrations of his voice. "Tell me, sweet Ella. Has anyone ever tied you up?"

With those simple words, the entire world is wrenched right out from under me. I'm no longer safe in my nest with Sinclair. I'm twenty years and a hundred miles away, forced back into a past I never wanted to revisit.

I must have gone completely stiff in his arms, because Sinclair's steady weight lifts away from me, and his worried face appears above me.

"Sweetheart, what is it?" I push him away, sitting up and heaving in panicked breaths as the blood rushes in my ears. The room around me has disappeared, replaced by the wretched halls of the orphanage. I'm shaking from head to toe, and no matter what I do, I can't seem to get enough air to breathe.

"Fuck," Sinclair curses under his breath, and I feel his strong arms wrapping around me. "Ella, it's okay. You're safe."

I clamp my eyes shut, trying to banish the sights and smells assaulting my mind, the memories I've tried so hard to forget. Sinclair hesitantly shifts me into his lap, rocking me back and forth. He repeats the same words over and over again. "You're safe. I'm here"

It takes some time but eventually I believe him. I come hurtling back down to earth at the speed of a meteor, crashing into a crater of despair. Still Sinclair doesn't stop telling me that I'm safe and that he loves me. I cling to him like a liferaft, praying that this solace will never cease, but knowing it must. There's no avoiding it now. When I'm calm enough I'm going to have to explain – and that's the very last thing I want to do.

Chapter 120 – Sinclair Walks Out

Ella

When my panic attack finally eases and I can breathe again, I peek up at Sinclair, tears burning in my eyes. “I’m sorry.” I murmur weakly, hating that my stupid brain ruined our moment.

“Why the hell are you apologizing?” Sinclair counters, still petting me. He hadn’t let me go even once as I weathered the storm of anxiety and despair, only pulling the pillows and blankets of my nest closer so I would feel secure.

“Because I screwed everything up.” I explain thickly. “I was supposed to be helping you and I fell apart at a mere suggestion.” Shame is coursing through my veins, not because of the panic itself, but because of what it might mean: that I’m too fragile, too broken, to be Sinclair’s Luna.

“Ella, don’t be silly.” He replies, and though I understand he didn’t mean to dismiss my feelings, the words still sting. Sinclair opens his mouth to continue, undoubtedly with some trite platitude about how ‘these things happen’ or similar, but I cut him off.

“I’m not being silly!” I insist with exasperation.

What good am I as a mate if I can’t even be there for you when you need me? I get to lie around all day doing nothing while you’re out saving the world. You are constantly taking care of me on top of all your other worries, and I never give you anything in return. It’s not right. You shouldn’t have to comfort me when you’re the one who needs to decompress!” I burst, throwing up my hands. “All this time we’ve been convinced that I can’t be your Luna because I’m human, but we never even considered that I might not be up to the task, even as a wolf.” My voice is shaking with fresh tears, and I can’t look at Sinclair as I continue, “But now... what more evidence do we need?”

Sinclair doesn’t make a sound, and when I look at him, he’s positively fuming. His heavy breathing and black expression tell me he’s barely holding onto his temper, and the hands which were caressing me mere moments ago are now stationary and stiff. I watch as he struggles to quell his anger, even though I’m not sure what I said to infuriate him this way. After a second he shakes his head, apparently surrendering the battle. “I need a minute, Ella.” He finally growls, “I need to go for a run, but I don’t want to leave you unless you’re alright.”

“Stop it!” I burst, my voice cracking. I’m out of the bed in a heartbeat, pacing back and forth in front of the bed. “This is exactly what I’m talking about! Stop protecting me from reality. If you’re angry with me, then be angry! Let me deal with the consequences of my weakness!”

Sinclair leaps out of the nest, stalking forward with white-knuckled fists. "I'm not going to yell at you when you've just had a panic attack, Ella. If you want to be upset with me, fine, but I need to let my wolf out and run off this temper." He turns and charges for the door, bypassing me completely.

Then, at the last moment, he turns back, his wolf glowing in his eyes. "And for the record, this isn't special treatment." He rumbles angrily, "I don't believe in arguing or taking action when I'm out of control this way. If you need anything while I'm gone, just ask the guards."

With that, Sinclair disappears, and I can hear his wolf racing away down the hall. For a while I simply stand there, staring after him. I'm shaking again, and I'm trying my best not to dissolve into a fresh bout of weeping. I consider calling Cora, but I remember the way she accused me of selfishly unloading my problems onto her, and I refrain.

My wolf is pacing anxiously in my head, whimpering like a pup and feeling just as raw as I am – if more feral. She's begging me to do something, to fix this, but I don't know how. I might have felt terrible for falling apart when I was supposed to be soothing Sinclair, but my wolf seems much more distraught about Sinclair's anger.

We should go after him! She begs. I can't stand it, we have to fix this. We can't. I grumble in reply. Even if I wasn't on bed rest and it was perfectly safe, we'll never be able to catch up with him. Besides, he'll only be angrier if we leave the house.

She whimpers in understanding, though she's still beside herself. I climb back into bed, curling into a little ball and pulling the blankets over my head. I haven't felt this way before, though Sinclair has certainly been angry with me in the past. Hey, I ask my wolf after some thought. Why weren't you this upset when he accused me of being a gold digger, or when he spanked me or dragged me out of Cora's?

All those times were different. She argues. I was barely awake in the beginning, and when he's been angry in the past it's been protective. This is the first time he's really been hostile .. and the first time he's walked out. What if he doesn't come back?

Of course he'll come back. I assure her, but there's a small part of me that fears the exact same thing. Logically I know he has to come back, even if he only returns to end our relationship –

after all, he lives here. But somewhere deep down inside of me there's a frightened orphan who imagines I'll never see him again. But what if he decides we're not worth the trouble, and simply takes off for greener pastures? My wolf presses.

You're being ridiculous! I shout at her. His entire life is here. His pack is here. He has too much integrity to abandon his duty that way. But what if? She digs in her paws. It

wouldn't be the first time. He told us no wolf would ever willingly abandon their pup, especially with humans – but our parents did.

Something must be seriously wrong with us – what if he's finally figured it out too? What if this was the last straw? "Stop it!" I cry aloud, clamping my hands over my ears, even though her voice is inside my head. "

Stop it, stop it, stop it!" A sob wrenches from my chest, and the more time that passes, the more convinced I am that she's right. I almost feel as though I've left my body and am watching all this take place. I've had out of body experiences before, so I know that this isn't what's happening, but still – I'm both conscious of how irrational I'm being, but unable to do a thing to stop myself from spiraling deeper into my fears and insecurities.

When I finally hear Sinclair's footsteps climbing the stairs, the violent fist clenched around my heart starts to relax, but only just. If he's back it must be to end things. My

wolf wails. I want to shush her, but instead I focus on trying to look as though I haven't just spent the better part of two hours crying like a baby. I whip the blankets off and straighten my body, dragging my fingers through my hair and wiping the accumulated salt from my eyelashes.

So when the door opens and Sinclair walks in, still naked but considerably dirtier than he was when he left, I'm sitting up in bed pretending to read a book. I look up at him, cursing my lower lip for trembling. He certainly looks calmer now, but there's an undeniable tightness around his eyes as he looks me over. He comes over and moves to sit on the edge of the bed, but my wolf sees the dirt on his golden skin and a growl surfaces in my chest.

Seeming to understand that he's not allowed to sully my nest, Sinclair reaches his hand towards me, "come take a bath with me." I glance at his muddy feet skeptically, and he sighs. "I'll rinse off in the shower first."

"Then why not just shower?" I suggest, not wanting to put myself in a situation where I have to feel his body against mine as he breaks my heart. "Because I want to have a bath with you." Sinclair answers gruffly, "and I can tell you're still upset. We could both use it."

"Can we just get this over with?" I huff, Wrapping my arms around myself to hide my trembling." There's no reason to draw it out, Dominic. Just tell me what you decided," His face crumples into a grimace, "Decided about what?"

"Whether or not you're going to keep me!" I exclaim, knowing that I'm completely failing in my attempt to seem calm and collected. Just like that, Sinclair's face closes off, and

my heart sinks. Oh Goddess, I was right! My wolf howls mournfully. However instead of agreeing to my request, Sinclair glares and issues a single command, "Bath. Now."

Chapter 121 – Ella's Past

Trigger Warning: This chapter contains experiences of abuse and sexual assault, nothing explicit, but please take care reading..

Sinclair

Ella's small body is completely stiff in my arms, even though we're in her favorite place. I've only bathed with her once before, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how much she loves a bubble bath. She takes at least four a week, and when she's upset I've known her to have a bath even after showering.

Until I spoke with Cora about Ella's self-care practices, I didn't understand the connection to her childhood experience of neglect, but now that I know I'm determined never to deprive her of the comfort even if my water bills go through the roof and the city goes into a drought.

"Are you ready to talk this out, trouble?" I inquire, resting my hands on her round tummy and feeling a pulse of stress from the baby. A fresh spark of worry assails me, and I know that Rafe is channeling his mother's fraught emotions. Ella doesn't respond to my question, and I press on, realizing that the poor little wolf isn't going to relax until she knows I'm not going to reject her. Sweetheart, it never even crossed my mind to end things. I love you Ella's muscles tighten further, though I didn't think such a thing was possible.

"But..She stammers, twisting around to look at me, "but you left!" I'm sorry that I walked out." I reply gently, grazing my knuckles over her cheek. "But it wasn't because I ever had doubts about us." I share, wondering about my sweet mate's reaction.

I know some survivors of child abuse view any confrontation as a disaster or threat, but Ella has weathered my anger in the past without any signs of a trauma response. "I was angry that you thought you don't contribute anything to our relationship, and my wolf lost it when you suggested you couldn't be my Luna. The idea of losing you pushed me over the edge, and I needed to calm down before continuing."

Ella's brow furrows, and I can see her grappling with her emotions. "Dominic, I didn't just think you might end things." She whispers, staring at the water. "I wasn't even sure you'd come back.. think.. I think maybe I have some abandonment issues I wasn't completely aware of. And Mike's betrayal and learning that I'm a wolf has thrown them into very sharp focus."

Understanding washes over me, and I gently flip her body the rest of the way over. When Ella is facing me completely, I snuggle her to my chest, lowering my knees so that she can straddle my lap. "I'm so sorry, baby." I profess, kissing her head and stroking her spine. "I shouldn't have left you when you were already upset, I just don't

trust myself not to say things I don't mean when I'm that angry.

The same way I would never make a pack ruling or deliver a punishment in the height of a fury. I think taking some space in the heat of the moment can be healthy, but maybe we can find some way to take breaks in fights without too much physical distance." I suggest. "But even if we can't, you need to know that no matter how far I go or how long I stay away, I will always come back to you, Ella."

Ella whimpers, and her arms tighten around me. "Thank you," She hiccups, "and I'm sorry I said I couldn't be your Luna, but you have to admit that I'm not pulling my weight here. This isn't the first time I've tried to be there for you and failed."

"Ella, look at me for a moment." I order, sliding my finger under her chin and pulling her eyes up to mine. "First of all you take care of me all the time. You saved my campaign. You keep me calm when I'm being an ogre You stand up to bullies like the Prince and Lydia, and you share my burdens even when I don't want you to. Moreover, I need to dominate my mate. It's in an Alpha's DNA to nurture and protect. If you didn't let me comfort and take care of you, I would be a mess."

Ella frowns. "But I didn't let you. I panicked. "That's the other thing." I sigh, recalling the terror that came over her beautiful face when I suggested tying her up. I've growled and grumbled at Ella a thousand times.

I've put her over my knee and overpowered her countless times without any issue. In fact most of the time her wolf responds to my bossiness like a bee to honey. "I think we both know this didn't happen randomly. I accidentally triggered something specific, didn't I?"

I'm still holding Ella's chin, but her eyes look anywhere but at me. Slight pressure nudges my fingers as Ella gives a slight nod, and then her wide gaze returns to mine, suddenly so vulnerable that my heart aches. "Do we have to talk about it?"

I wish I could tell her no, promise that she won't ever have to relive her painful memories, but I know that wouldn't help anything. "We're in a sexual relationship, Ella. I can't avoid your triggers if I don't know what they are." I reason, "and keeping these things buried only causes them to fester.

Tears well in those brilliant gold orbs, and I hate knowing that I'm causing my mate to cry for the upteenth time today. "Do we have to talk about it now.

I think so." I resolve gravely. "It's never going to hurt any less, and the sooner you tell me, the sooner it will be over with."

Ella nods again, and I let her rest her cheek on my chest as she begins to speak.

“The orphanage had these dormitories that were divided by age. So the youngest children

would share a room, and the older we got, we would move up accordingly. Cora is a year older than me, but when she turned eleven and was going to be moved into a dorm with the older girls we both panicked a bit. We’d always been together and didn’t want to be separated, and she also used to crawl into my bed at night when she had nightmares – which was most nights.

She was afraid that the older girls would make fun of her, and I didn’t want to leave her without a friend when monsters visited her dreams. Long story short, I pitched a fit so they would allow me to move with her.”

“I remember being surprised at how easily they agreed, but the dormitory matron seemed really pleased to have me.” Ella pauses, taking a deep breath. “She was always telling me how pretty I was.. and that she’d had her eye on me for some time. I didn’t understand what she meant, but she always gave me a really uneasy feeling. In hindsight I think that might have been part of why I was so determined to stay with Cora... I think my instincts were warning me that the new dorm wasn’t safe.”

As Ella speaks, my wolf is growling louder and louder in my head, his energy becoming more vicious and unhinged by the moment. We both know what is coming, and suddenly I’m doubting whether or not I’ll be able to stay calm enough to hear this.

“The first night in the dorm seemed normal at first. Lights out was at eight, so everyone got in bed and everything shut off. But when the clock struck midnight, everything changed. I remember waking up with Cora beside me, and all the other girls were out of bed and slinking away.”

“I watched them sneak behind curtains, in cupboards, behind furniture and into any nook and Cranny they could find... They were hiding.” Ella explains hoarsely. “I tried to ask what was happening, but no one answered. I had enough sense to realize something was very wrong, so woke Cora and told her to hide. She climbed into the laundry basket, and I got under my bed and held myself up off the floor, balancing my hands and feet against the underside of the bed frame”

“The matron came in about a minute later, and she didn’t say a word, she just began searching. She must have been excited that there were new children to prey on, because she found some of the veteran girls and just ignored them. She would open a cabinet, peer inside, and cluck when she saw the trembling child inside, then close it up as if nothing happened... Then she found Cora.”

Ella’s eyes are clenched shut, and I’m trying to calm myself down enough to purr for her, but it isn’t easy. “I didn’t know what was going to happen, but every instinct I possessed

was screaming with alarm. I knew that it was bad and I didn't want Cora to be hurt. so I jumped out of my hiding spot and made sure she saw me. I told her...

I told her to take me instead."

Chapter 122 – Ella's Past Part 2

Sinclair

Don't shift, don't shift, don't shift. I think manically Ella needs you. Listening to Ella recount her childhood always makes me furious, but this time is worse than all the others. I've suspected that Ella suffered terrible traumas for some time now, but before this night I'd been able to pacify my outrage with the hope that I'm wrong. No longer.

As Ella speaks, I wonder how she could ever imagine herself weak. I can't even stand to listen to her story, but she actually lived it. She sacrificed herself for her sister, and she survived things I can only imagine "When the matron realized it was me, she smiled so cruelly that my stomach turned she was only too glad to take, me instead of Cora." Ella continues, shuddering with the memory. Her unease gives my wolf the push he needed to put aside his own rage and comfort her. I finally manage a weak purr, and Ella presses her nose to my chest, breathing in my scent.

"She took me to her own room and put me in her bed, and then she got in with me and.. started touching me in ways I didn't like or understand.

She made me touch her too, and she never stopped talking She told me how pretty I was over and over, and kept asking me if I liked it. I said no, but she just insisted that this was a special, secret game I was lucky to play. She said everything I was feeling might be confusing, but it was good and right and natural. She said it took practice, but that we'd have plenty of time.. Afterwards she took me back to the dorm with a reminder not to share our secret. Cora asked me what happened but I didn't know how to explain."

"The next day I went to the doctor in residence, and I told him what the matron had done. I'd never liked him much, but in my heart I knew what had happened was wrong, and I didn't know who else to tell. I thought that since it was about my body, the doctor was the one who could help.

There was no such thing as sex ed at the orphanage and no one else ever talked to us about our bodies. At first I was relieved to tell someone. The doctor seemed very concerned, and agreed that it sounded strange."

"Then he told me that he needed to examine me. Ella's words are coming in starts and stops now, and her shaking is getting worse. The bath is still steaming around us, so I know she isn't cold and I know the worst isn't over yet. "He took off my clothes and put me on the exam table. and then I'll never forget the way he said, 'now it's very important that you be still, Ella. This is a different kind of exam than you're used to, and if you move too much I could hurt you.

Tears stream down Ella's cheeks as she quotes the doctor, and it takes all my strength

to contain my wolf. "Then he said, I know little girls can have a hard time staying still, so I have these nifty straps to help you. He pulled out restraints from under the table and strapped me down. and then he asked me exactly what the matron did, and when I explained he would touch me exactly how she had, saying like this? and if I didn't answer, if I cried or objected, he would only do it rougher and demand I tell him".

"After the first minute or so I figured out what he was about, and I didn't want to answer his questions anymore, but if I didn't speak he would start guessing more and more abuses, always demonstrating them on my body. They were far worse than anything she'd done.. So I answered. I told him how to hurt me." Ella is interrupted by my ferocious snarl, and she looks up at me for the first time since she started speaking. Her eyes are overflowing, but she offers me a bitter smile and reaches up to stroke my jaw. "It's okay, big bad wolf, it's almost over.

My snarl becomes a whine, and Ella determinedly forges on. "I was too young to understand why they did those things, but I knew how it made me feel: guilty, tainted, defiled.. I never wanted it to happen again, but I was already broken, and there were other girls like Cora who weren't yet.

Oh no. No, no, no tell me she didn't! I have a horrible sick feeling in my stomach, and I wish could go back in time and whisk Ella away from that horrible place before anyone could hurt her.

Of course, that only would have meant other children would be hurt, which is how I already know what Ella did. My brave, brilliant little mate would never stand by and let another child be abused... even if it meant being abused herself.

"So I stopped hiding at night. I gave myself up so the others wouldn't be touched.. I figured I couldn't be ruined more than I already was, and it was better than allowing someone else to be destroyed." Ella shares, confirming my fears but also magnifying my despair by explaining her logic. "The matron came almost every night... and the doctor would call me in for check ups every few weeks. I hated those visits worse than anything. the matron was sort of gentle, and she never tied me down or gagged me. She didn't want to inflict pain, she seemed determined to make me like it."

The doctor was different. He was a true sadist; he loved my fear, loved my pain. And he escalated over time." Ella hides her face in my neck as she concludes her horrible tale "When I was twelve he r*ped me, and that's when Cora and I ran away. I invited the other girls to run with us, but most were more afraid of living on the street than they were of the matron. Luckily they didn't know about the doctor, and I warned the ones who stayed behind to never confide in him."

My hands are clamped so tightly on Ella I'm afraid I must be hurting her, but she doesn't complain. She's still crying, but her muscles have unwound now that her story is

complete. There are tears in my own eyes, and I can only kiss and caress my sweet mate as I process everything she shared. “

Are they still there? The matron and the doctor?” I finally ask, my voice a dangerous hiss.

“No.” Ella replies. “Cora and I could only live outside during the summers, and we tried to stay away through the first winter, but eventually the police found us squatting in an abandoned building and returned us to the orphanage. When we got back they had

both been fired. Apparently a state inspection was run and the entire staff was booted out. The new regime wasn’t much better, so we kept running away in the summers, but it was safe enough to return each winter.. I have no idea where those two are now.

I’ll hunt them down.” I decide, bloodthirsty fantasies already racing through my mind. If it’s possible, my wolf is dreaming of even gorier revenges than I am, particularly for the doctor.

We’ll just see how he likes being tied up and gagged. How much he enjoys pain and having things shoved.

“You don’t have to do that.” Ella interrupts his disturbing plans, nuzzling my throat. “I survived, and I’m safe now.” She says it almost as though she’s trying to remind herself more than me, and I scold myself for turning to vengeance when she still needs comforting.

“You are safe.” I confirms, stroking her hair and depositing kisses everywhere I can reach. “You’re safe and loved and the only way anyone will ever hurt you again is over my dead body.” I don’t add that I still plan on finding her abusers, if not for vengeance than to ensure they never harm another child.

I’m painfully aware of the fact that other children might be in their grasps at this very moment, but Ella doesn’t need to hear that Ella pulls her head up, narrowing her red eyes at me “Dominic, I would rather be hurt than lose you.

No. I proclaim, the corner of my mouth twitching up. “I will lay down my life before I allow you to get so much as a paper cut. I will throw myself to the wolves if you even stub your toe.

Ella manages a small laugh, and the pain in my chest eases slightly She peeks up at me from beneath her lashes “But if you’re not here then who will kiss my injuries better? Who will keep me from bumping into furniture and bruising myself?

Hmm, you make a good point." I decide, "perhaps we can negotiate the level of injury that warrants my death."

"How gracious of you" She smiles, sighing as I run my hands up and down her sides. I'm infinitely relieved that Ella has finally relaxed, but I can't get over what she told me.

"You're incredible, you know that? I inquire, knowing she doesn't want to hear it, but shushing her objections. "I mean it, Ella. I know you were angry with yourself for panicking when you were trying to help me, but the fact that you did is the direct result of the sacrifices you made to protect your family. It's not a sign of weakness Sweetheart. It's evidence of your strength your resilience. I lean down to kiss her You were born to be a Luna, and you will be mine.

Chapter 123 – Rogue Attacks

Sinclair

After Ella shared her story with me, we spent a long time just kissing and cuddling, talking through our feelings and reaffirming our love. Still, Ella wasn't entirely soothed.

I could tell she was still beating herself up about her panic attack, no matter how many times I promised her it was all right I just want to be able to give you what you need. Ella moans after a while, sounding as miserable as ever.

"I don't need to tie you up, baby. I promise, wondering if I'll ever be able to convince her that she's enough for me exactly as she is. "There are plenty of other things we can do."

"But the idea of being tied up with you doesn't frighten me." Ella confesses, surprising me. "I think it was just the way you asked. Because it wasn't about you and me, it was about what had been done to me in the past.

I frown, unsure if she's being completely forthright. "That's possible." I agree. "But the chances are that if the question was that upsetting, feeling it would be worse."

"Not if I know it's coming, and not if I'm handcuffed or something. The straps on a medical table are different." Ella argues. "I'm not saying I want to try it right this second or when you're really stressed. It would probably be better when things are calmer so that if I do panic it doesn't ruin everything, but I think I would like to try sometime."

"You really don't have to, Ella." I assure her "Not for my sake. It should be fun for both of us, not something you have to endure."

"I'm not just saying it for you Ella insists. "I don't like thinking that they still have so much power over me. Maybe if I can get over that fear by replacing the bad memories with some good ones I can take my power back."

I narrow my eyes at the little minx, wondering if this is another tactic to convince me. Ella knows I'd do anything to help her, and it would certainly be clever to turn the tables on me this way.

However when I look into her shining eyes, I see only sincerity. "Okay, one day when things are calmer, we can try" I decide, running my hands over her slick skin. "But if you give me reason to think you're just humoring me, you're going to be in big trouble, baby."

"I'm not" Ella insists indignantly, sitting up and giving me a delectable view of water dripping down her bare breasts. "I don't know if it's my wolf coming out or what,

but the more time that passes, the more I find myself craving your.. well, your dominance.”

She flushes bright red as the words leave her mouth, and I'm relieved to see that all the heavy emotion of the last hour is starting to fade in favor of flirtation.

“It might be your wolf.” I confirm with a grin, sliding my palms up to cup her sensitive mounds running my thumbs over the tight buds at their center. Ella shivers and arches into my hands, delightfully sensitive amidst her raging hormones.

“Or maybe you've always been a secret sex friend, and you just needed time to tap into that part of yourself.”

Ella blinks, dropping her gaze for a moment before looking back up at me in surprise, as if she's just realized something. “Do you remember when we first found each other, and I was confused because I felt like a different person with you? You said I was becoming the person I was always meant to be, and it just hadn't been safe for me to come out of my shell before.”

“Mmm,” I rumble fondly, needing no help to recall our food fight. “As I recall you thought I was full of it.”

“But you were right.” Ella muses, sliding her arms around my neck. “My wolf recognized you even before I knew she existed.”

“Are you saying I'm right now too, and you are a sex friend?” I joke, beyond pleased when her beautiful laugh meets my ears “only for you. Ella grins, making my inner wolf swell with pride.

“

Well you never have to worry about getting my dominance, trouble.” I tease, dragging her forward for a kiss. “You know exactly how to bring it out” I nip her plump lower lip and claim her mouth again, the passion always simmering for this incredible woman surging to a sudden boil. I'm already fantasizing about how I can create the most pleasure for us both without losing the stranglehold I'm keeping on my mating instincts.

when the bedroom door crashes open in the distance I smell Hugo before I see him, which is the only reason I don't react more forcefully.

Instead I simply pull my mouth lips from Ella's, my wolf going into high alert. If Hugo is barging in this way it must be an emergency. Ella yelps when my Beta stalks in a moment later, Ella is hiding her face in my neck, almost as though she thinks

Hugo might not be able to see her if she can't see him. I offer her a soft purr, but I look up at my second-in command with instant anxiety, "What's wrong?"

He glances nervously at Ella, but I nod for him to continue. "One of our spies in the border territories just called in an urgent warning. Apparently a coalition of rogue wolves is planning an assault on Moon Valley. Their numbers are in the hundreds and they're coming at us from all sides. This isn't just some raid it's a highly coordinated attack and you can bet they didn't organize it on their own.

"When?" I demand sharply, already reaching for a towel. I slide Ella's body off of mine, concealing her beneath the bubbles of the deep bath and rising out of the water. "Tonight." Hugo sighs in exasperation. "We have maybe two hours to get reinforcements to our scouts."

I swear viciously, the borders of Moon Valley extend for hundreds of miles, we don't have enough time to reach our most remote outposts, and those are probably the ones the rogues will be targeting first. "Call in everyone you can and immediately deploy those already on duty. Send them to the most vulnerable outposts first, and make sure everyone is fully briefed.

Deploy the warning sirens and release a bulletin to all the media outlets in the city, order an immediate lockdown and roll out the emergency helpline for anyone who sights or encounters rogue aggressors. Tell them to issue reminders on shelter locations, and set closing times for two hours from now. Have the hospitals initiate their own emergency protocols and put out a call to any

willing and able wolves who want to help defend the city, but make the dangers damn clear. No one under 18.

The words flow from my lips out of pure reflex, and Hugo immediately turns on his heel to carry out my instructions. When he's gone, I turn back to Ella, who is looking up at me with wide eyes. I pluck her out of the bath and wrap her in a towel. "

Listen to me, Ella. Your guards are going to take you to a safe house and it's critical that you stay there until the danger has passed. I'll come for you as soon as I can, but listen to the guards and don't set a single foot outside until the all clear orders have been given. Don't open the door for anyone, and don't even think about doing anything heroic.

If you see an injured child lying in the street, leave them for the guards to help. Do you understand me?" Ella furrows her brow, unease flowing off her in waves "But where will you be? What are you going to be doing?"

"I have to stand with my men." I explain. "We're going to need all the help we can get."

“Fighting, you mean.” Ella clarifies. “You’re going into battle?” Yes.” I answer simply, knowing I can’t shield her from the truth. “I wish I didn’t have to leave you, but I can’t let other wolves defend my city without me.”

Ella’s lower lip, still swollen from my kisses, is trembling. “Do you promise that you’ll come back to me?”

“I’m not going to let some dirty rogue get the better of me, baby.” Taking her face in my hands, I continue, “Now give me your word that you’ll do as I’ve asked” I command. “Go to the safe house, listen to the guards, and wait for me.”

Ella nods shakily, and I pull her into my arms. Our lips collide with sudden desperation as if we’re both thinking the same thing. Just in case it’s for the last time. Suddenly I realize I never walked Ella through the contingency plans she requested, like what to do if I’m killed. Unfortunately there’s no time for that now. Her guards know what to do if the worst happens, and that will have to be enough for the time being.

“I love you.” I profess, stealing one last kiss. “No matter what.” “I love you too. Ella answers, tears spilling down her cheeks. “Please be safe, Dominic.”

“Don’t worry, trouble. We’ll be together again before you know it. I answer, but we both know that’s not a promise I can make. Every time I go into battle, I do so knowing it might be the end, but I’ve never had more of a reason to survive than I do now, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let this be my last moment with Ella. I’m going to make it – I have to.

Chapter 124 – Lydia Gives Advice

3rd Person

“Another rogue attack?” Lydia scoffed, circling the Prince as he studied his plans for the invasion, “haven’t you attempted enough to realize they aren’t going to work?” “This one is different.” The Prince groused in reply. “I’m not just targeting Sinclair’s bitch or a few tourists. The entire pack will be in shambles and Dominic will be held responsible.”

A moment later the emergency sirens began blaring through the city, and the Prince surged to his feet, “What! No! How did he find out?”

Lydia swore under her breath, “because he keeps spies in the neutral territories, just like you do – just like all the Alpha’s do.” She promptly crossed the floor and snatched up the television remote, flipping to the news where an emergency bulletin was dominating the screen.

An anxious reporter read off a teleprompter, his voice full of urgency. “Moon Valley is facing imminent attack from rogue actors. Take shelter in your home or at your nearest designated safety point. Alpha Sinclair has ordered an immediate lockdown until the “all clear” chime can be rung.

Pack enforcers are on their way to meet the threat and hopefully force back the rogues before they can breach the city, but extreme caution is advised for all citizens. The human mayor has been informed and is instituting a city shut down under the guise of a gas leak...”

The reporter carried on in the background as Lydia turned back to the Prince, annoyance dominating her features. “How much time is there before the attack?”

“They won’t reach the city for another three hours at least, if they make it into the territory at all.” The Prince explained, overflowing with agitated energy. “Where are they striking?” Lydia pressed, her mind racing for a solution to this crisis.

“Their scouts have identified half a dozen stretches along the border with the least patrols and easiest access.” He shared, pressing a button on the underside of his desk to summon his beta.

“That’s exactly where Dominic will go.” Lydia gritted out. “They should be targeting more mid-level outposts.” “But they’ll have a harder time breaching those.” The Prince argued obstinately.

“Yes, but they might actually get through with a few losses. The way you’ve organized this, all the reinforcements are going to meet them head on and they won’t actually be able to get into the city!” Lydia exclaimed, losing her patience with the man’s

stupidity. “Well it’s too late to change plans now, so I don’t know what you expect me to do!”

Prince Damon exploded, equally sick of the bossy she-wolf’s criticism. He paced back and forth, dragging his hands through his hair in frustration. “He’ll be out there fighting with them... the self-righteous bastard...” He mused after a moment. “I could send some of my own enforcers under the guise of helping fend off the attack. With enough men, they might be able to kill him and frame the rogues.”

Lydia’s heart fluttered nervously. She wanted to destroy Sinclair, but he was still her fated mate. The idea of his death made her wolf writhe inside her chest, still, she might have gotten over that. She couldn’t get over the idiocy. “It will never work. Even if they were strong enough to overpower him, he’ll have an entire army at his back.

Besides,” She pointed to the television, where the bulletin still flashed violently on the screen. “They’re calling for able-bodied wolves to join the fight, which means there will be dozens of witnesses even if you do somehow manage to succeed!” “Then I’ll go after his whore!” The Prince lashed out, slamming his fist into his desk. “He won’t be there to protect her this time!”

Lydia shook her head, “She’ll be in a safe house. Besides, haven’t you learned you lesson by now? Think of your own situation, if she dies he only looks more sympathetic.” “But he won’t have an heir.” The Prince insisted.

“But people know he’s not sterile now – he can make another.” Lydia explained. “Look, you can’t defeat him. Every time you try, he manages to outmaneuver you. You can’t overpower him because he’s too strong. You can’t outsmart him because he’s too clever. And you can’t out charm him. Look at everything that has already happened.”

Lydia gestured to the television again, as camera footage of Sinclair leading a charge of wolves to the border played across the screen, looking like scenes from some high - octane action movie. The Prince’s beta finally entered as they watched the video, his mouth set in a hard line as he assessed the scene.

“What are your orders, sir?” He asked hesitantly, seeing the obvious jealousy and rage on the other man’s face.

The Prince looked to Lydia, who he was coming to hate for her intelligence, but whom he also realized he needed. When the campaign was over he’d cut her down to size, but for the time being he needed her on his side.” Your ratings are at an all time high and he’s still beating you.” Lydia reminded him, trying not to think about how powerful Sinclair looked on the screen and keep her attention on the matter at hand.

“So what? What am I supposed to do?” The prince thundered, not needing

this reminder. "If you can't beat him, the only option available is to force him to step down. Make him take himself out of the running." Lydia advised slyly, clearly pleased with herself.

"How?" The beta inquired curiously. "You weren't wrong about his weakness." Lydia answered coolly, thoroughly enjoying making these powerful wolves stew. "You've just been going about it the wrong way." "I don't understand." The Prince growled, losing his patience.

Lydia rolled her eyes. "Use Ella. Don't kill her, hold her hostage and make the ransom his campaign. Tell him that unless he steps down, he'll never see her again, you'll do terrible things to her."

The Prince paused, liking the sounds of this – particularly the opportunity to have Sinclair's beautiful mate at his mercy. "What makes you think he won't give her up?"

The self-righteous bastard might sacrifice her for the greater good, and that's assuming I can even get my hands on her." "Trust me, I was married to the man for more than a decade. He's not as much of a goody two shoes as you think. He's extremely possessive and he won't be able to help himself – his wolf will get the better of him. Either he'll give up the throne or he'll try to stage a rescue. Either way, you'll win." Lydia shrugged.

"How do I win if he stages a rescue?" The Prince demanded sharply. "You make it a trap." Linda answered, thinking that it wouldn't be very hard to arrange with someone in possession of a brain behind the wheel." Assemble enough forces to overpower him, ensure he has to go in alone, and don't leave anything to chance."

"It's not a bad idea." The beta approved. "We need to stop trying to fight him and just play dirty – shoot him with a tranquilizer and kill him while he's unconscious." "That's a coward's move." The Prince countered fiercely.

"Maybe, but it's also the only way you'll ever kill him." Lydia responded, becoming more and more immune to the idea of Sinclair's death the more they discussed it. After all, he rejected her publicly, he humiliated her, chose that little bitch over her. "Fine. Let's say we can make all that happen – we still need to get to Ella and you just said she'll be in a safe house." The Prince reasoned.

"She will, until the 'all clear' is given." Lydia answered with a diabolical smile. "But Sinclair isn't the only one who can give the 'all clear.'" She reminded him. As Prince, Damon also had the power to raise alarms and call off the danger, though he had never before needed to do so.

The Prince's eyes lit up, if I can make the city think the attack is over, they'd all come out

of hiding before it's actually safe. The attack could still work – and Ella will return to the pack house.” 1 “And she'll barely have any guards because they'll all still be out fighting.” Lydia nodded smugly. ‘This is the best chance you're going to get to take her.’ “We'll have to wait a while, if we call the all clear too soon, they won't believe it.”

The beta warned. “And the news coverage?” The Prince asked. “Won't people be able to see the danger isn't passed?” “It doesn't matter if some of the pack don't come out, the one who really matters is Ella, and I know for a fact that all of Dominic's safe house are off the grid.

They have no technology, nothing that might be used to trace the location.” Lydia replied smoothly, more than a little pleased with her own cunning.

A terrible smile stretched across the Prince's face as he observed the calculating shewolf. ‘You might be of some used to me yet.’ He informed her arrogantly. Lydia smirked. “Just you wait. Before this is over you'll be wondering how you ever survived without me.”

Chapter 125 – Ella Hears the All Clear

Ella

The waiting is horrible.

I did exactly as Sinclair asked and followed the guards to the safe house, taking only a few essentials. We left our phones and technology behind, and then I was piled into the back of a car and hidden under a blanket just in case someone found a way to glimpse through the black out windows.

We drove for more than half an hour, making all kinds of twists and turns. I'm sure some of it was just evasive driving to make sure we weren't being followed, which worries me more than I'd like to admit.

As I lay there I realized that Sinclair must have been afraid that this attack might be used as a distraction for the Prince to make a move against me, and that possibility seems more and more likely the more I think about it. Hadn't the Prince been planning a distraction just like this before the Queen died? It's no wonder Sinclair hadn't wanted me to stay at the house even though it's the most secure building in the city next to the Royal Palace.

When we arrived at the safe house I was relieved to discover it was a veritable fortress. It didn't even look like a house, in fact, when the car pulled to a stop in front of a huge rock wall on the side of a mountain, I assumed one of the guards needed to use the restroom or something.

I couldn't have been more surprised when they all exited the car and began pressing on the rocks, moving their hands around on the granite until they found the right spot and pushed in. It took all four of them, each pressing on a specific spot in perfect unison, before the mountain itself opened up. The rock wall slid inward, even though it had looked completely solid from the outside.

One of the guards lifted me out of the car and carried me inside, and all but the driver entered with me. Just before the wall closed behind us, I saw the car speeding away again. It had all happened in about 30 seconds, and when I look around I'm amazed to discover that the interior of the mountain is as luxurious and comfortable as the mansion. Despite being an actual cave, electricity lights the sprawling rooms, which are fully furnished and decked out with amenities.

When I look back at the entrance I discover a keypad mounted in the rock, but no sign of the door. A flash of claustrophobia overtakes me and I worry about how I'll get out again, but I take a deep breath and try to comfort myself with the knowledge that no one could possibly find me here.

There are books and games filling the bookcases, as well as a space to exercise, but little other entertainment. I investigate the kitchen and find only a pantry full of canned goods, as well as a freezer full of frozen food.

I decide to try and distract myself by baking, thinking that I might be able to welcome Sinclair home with some homemade cookies or something similar. However when I move towards the pantry, my head guard Gabriel crosses his arms over his chest. "You're still on bed rest, Luna."

I arch my brow at him, experiencing a familiar rush of annoyance to be bossed around by someone who is not my mate. "I can be on my feet for twenty minutes. After that, I'll sit at the counter."

He rumbles wordlessly, as if he's unsure whether or not he should allow me this work around. I notch my chin up defiantly, cradling my belly. As if he could ever care more about my baby's well being than I do. I think grumpily. Besides, an extra five minutes on my feet when I'm doing something that relaxes me.

"If you're that concerned then you can bring me all of the ingredients and do the clean up." I suggest slyly, perfectly happy to let him take over the less fun job. "Alright." Gabriel agrees, seeming pleased to have a task. "What do you need?"

I rattle off a list, and begin opening ingredients as Gabriel collects bowls and measuring cups. "Has something like this ever happened before?" I ask after a moment, wondering if he resents the fact that he's trapped here with me instead of out fighting with Sinclair and the enforcers.

"Not in my memory." Gabriel replies grimly. Centuries ago this sort of thing wasn't that uncommon. Bands of rogues would join up and even form coalitions at times. Under a powerful rebel leader, rogues have tried to take down entire packs before, but the idea that this is happening in this day and age is unheard of. "How bad is it going to look for Dominic?" I inquire, measuring out flour and sugar.

"I'm not sure." He answers, taking a packet of butter from the freezer and setting it in the microwave for me. "If he's able to prevent the attack entirely he'll get celebrated for protecting the pack, but it doesn't look good that the rogues felt emboldened enough to take him on."

"Like people might think he's not providing enough of a deterrent to keep them out, that he looks weak to outsiders?" I clarify, trying to understand. "Exactly." Gabriel confirms. "I can guarantee that's how the Prince will spin this."

"That isn't fair." I argue glumly, beginning to cream the thawed butter. "I hate that he keeps causing all this trouble but Dominic is the one who pays the price."

Gabriel frowns. "Being Alpha is a thankless job most times. When every thing goes right no one notices, because he's just doing his job. But if something goes wrong then he gets dragged through the mud." I catch myself growling, "Dominic does everything for his people, they ought to recognize that."

"I agree." Gabriel replies, smothering a smile. "How long will this all take?" I inquire after a pause. "The state of emergency? It could be hours, or days,- depending how serious the situation is." Gabriel explains with a grimace.

"Do you wish you were out there with them?" I ask, watching his expression closely. Gabriel blinks, looking surprised. "Of course not."

He answers, seeming amazed that I should even ask. "You have to admit this is a lot more boring than being in the thick of it." As the words leave my mouth I realize how insensitive they might sound.

"I mean I know battle is a terrible thing, but it can't be easy babysitting me when everyone you care about is out risking their lives."

Gabriel had been carefully closing the bags and boxes of ingredients once I finished with them, but now he goes still. "Do you have no idea what an honor it is to be assigned to guard you? The men in this room are here because the Alpha has deemed us the fiercest warriors in his guard – the ones most trusted to protect you if he can't. Our positions are second only to his beta."

"Oh." I breathe, processing this information. "I didn't realize." This information dances through my head, trying to make sense of this. "And you don't resent the fact that you might be hurt for my sake?"

He shakes his head, giving me a look that says he thinks I'm crazy. "You're new to all this, but you have to understand that without you, the pack is weaker. A pack's Luna is incredibly important sacred not only because she gives us heirs and the next generation of Alphas, but because she leads the she-wolves, she is the Alpha's rock.

The Alpha might be the pack's backbone, but the Luna is its heart. Any of us would gladly lay down our lives for you."

"But I don't want anyone to die for me." I murmur softly, staring at the cookie batter in front of me. "of course you don't." Gabriel smiles. "That's what makes you a good Luna."

I find myself blushing, barely able to utter my thanks. Gabriel and I continue baking

in companionable silence, and soon cookies are coming out of the oven piping hot, with melting chocolate sticking to the baking tray. The other guards appear as the scent wafts through the house, and before long I have to confiscate the remaining cookies so that there will be some left over for Sinclair.

Soon after the cookies finish, a deafening chime sounds outside, and all the guards sit up in surprise. "That was fast." One of the other guards, Sean remarks in surprise. "Is that the all clear?" I ask curiously. "Yes, but maybe we should wait for Sinclair."

Gabriel suggests. "He told us to bring her home at the all clear." Sean counters. "I don't know," Gabriel hesitates. "Something feels off." "We have our orders." Sean insists. "I say we follow protocol and take her home." "Alright." Gabriel agrees with a heavy sigh.

We move into a room I hadn't noticed before, which leads to a small garage. We climb into a waiting vehicle and Gabriel presses a button on something which looks suspiciously like a garage door opener. For the second time that day, the mountain opens, and we take off into the night.

Of course, this is a decision I'll come to regret terribly. I wish we hadn't left the safe house. I wish we'd waited for Sinclair to come for us. If we had, my guards might still be alive... and my own life might have gone very differently.

But we did leave.. we left, and walked straight into the Prince's trap.

Chapter 126 – The Kidnap

Ella

The streets were all but empty as we drove through the darkened city. I suppose everyone is still inside watching the news or waiting for more information to be released about the attack. I understand that we needed to be off the grid so no one could track us electronically, but I wish I had my phone. I wish I knew what had happened. I'm impatient to see Sinclair, to hear what happened and make sure he isn't wounded.

My wolf is whining in my head, eager to be reunited with her mate. I've been trying to avoid thinking about the danger Sinclair has been facing while I was safe and sound with my guards, but now that the crisis has passed the possibilities consume me.

I'm imagining returning home to find Sinclair covered in blood, his powerful shoulders crumbling under the weight of the lives he took tonight. He's going to need me, and I'm already wondering how I can possibly comfort him when I don't have the first clue what it's like to go to war. My guards are clearly focused on a very different train of thought. "Something still feels off to me."

Gabriel grumbles, scanning the deserted streets "If the all clear is ringing, why hasn't anyone come out yet?" He mutters, dragging a hand over his face. "I think it feels off because it was a crazy situation to begin with." Sean answers. "There's never been an attack of this size in living memory."

"Which is precisely why this is too soon for the danger to have passed." Gabriel shakes his head, slowing the car. "I don't like this. I think we should go back" Just as the words leave his mouth, the sound of screeching brakes shatters the quiet.

A black SUV with tinted windows skids to a stop in front of us, cutting off our path. Gabriel slams on the brakes and the car lurches to a violent stop. The guard beside me throws his arm out to prevent me from slamming into the back of the driver's seat.

His hand catches me in the sternum, stealing the air from my lungs. Before anyone can say a word, Gabriel curses and throws the car into reverse. We only make it a few meters when the vehicle slams to a stop again, this time colliding with a deafening crash. My body is jolted and jostled, and I whip around to see what we hit. A second SUV is behind us, blocking our escape route. "Fuck." Gabriel explodes, "It's a set up."

I realize that there are other cars around us, blocking our path. Terror slices through me as understanding sets in. The battle isn't over yet.

We've walked into a trap, and Sinclair isn't here to protect me this time. He's so far away

that there's no chance he might make it back in time to help me. I have to trust that my guards will keep me safe, even if my pounding heart and the blood rushing in my ears warns me that this is all going to end very badly.

"Ella, hold on." Gabriel instructs. "We're not going to get out of this without a few scrapes." He forces his foot down on the accelerator, and the car surges backward at full speed. There's nowhere to go, so our only option is to try and push the other car out of the way. It rocks and slides, nearly toppling, becoming dented and smashed inward as it hops up onto the curb.

The noise is deafening, and I feel like a ragdoll as my body is thrown around wildly, yanked back and forth by gravity. I'm restrained by my seatbelt and the guard's arm, but we'll all fairly helpless to do anything but try to minimize the damage to our bodies.

Glass shatters somewhere on my left, but I'm still just trying to get my bearings. I've never been in a car crash before, and I've heard people say that time slows down in this sort of accident. I wish time would slow down, everything is happening all at once, and I can't keep up.

The car behind us is almost out of the way now, but the SUV on our right rams into the passenger side door, pushing us further away from safety.

Gabriel keeps trying to maneuver the vehicle around to give us an escape route, but the other cars have us completely surrounded. My head cracks against the window when the car ramming our side slams into us right as Gabriel attempts to reverse through the tiny opening between the rear car and the bollards protecting the footpath from errant vehicles like our own.

My vision goes black for a moment, and the next thing I know, everything is still. My guards are climbing out of the car and shifting into their wolves, and Gabriel gives me one last order. "Whatever you do, stay inside, Ella."

The world around me has gone very fuzzy, and I'm horrified when I look out the window and see how many wolves are waiting to fight my guards. I count at least

three dozen, and part of me is furious that the Prince chose to send his best fighters here, when the people he hopes to rule are facing an imminent threat. I know he's the one who created the threat, but he could at least put on a show and pretend to care, to help defend the city I feel very nauseous all of a sudden, and it only gets worse when the fighting begins. I've seen more than a little violence in my life, but not like this.

Never like this. Gabriel, Sean and my other guards form a tight circle, their backs to one

another as they bare their fangs and snarl at our attackers. The Prince's men shift, and then they're clashing viciously with my guards. Blood sprays over the pavement, and I see flesh ripped and torn, bodies tossed onto the street like bags of bones.

There are a couple of sick bags tucked into the seat-back pocket in front of me, and I snatch one up, emptying the contents of my stomach into the plastic sack. I blink tears from my eyes, unsure whether I want to close my eyes and hide from the horrific scenes outside my window, or if I should watch.

When I peek outside I'm proud to see that Gabriel wasn't exaggerating when he told me how fierce he and his men are. It's obvious that they truly are Sinclair's best, because they look entirely unharmed even though half a dozen wolves already lay dead around them. Of course.. they're still vastly outnumbered, and the longer they fight, the more tired they become.

Sean is the first to die. I clasp a hand over my mouth to try and smother my scream when I see the other wolf rip out his throat. I'll never forget how his eyes swung to me with regret, even as the light winked out of them. Sobs burn in my throat, and when the second guard dies, it becomes too much.

I can't just sit here and let them die for me. I'm the one they want I think desperately. I have to do something. If you go out there now you'll distract them, and then they will die. My wolf responds.

Let them do their jobs! But they're completely outnumbered. It's only Gabriel and two others now. I shake my head stubbornly. I have to! They'll kill us! She reminds me ferociously, they'll kill the baby.

They're going to kill us anyway. I argue desperately, undiluted fear writhing in my belly. But my guards don't have to die too.

As I look back out the window, I see Gabriel thrown through the air before he lands in a heap near the back of the car. He tries to get up, then crumples with a groan. Six wolves descend on him, and he tries to rise again, only for his legs to give out.

I'm out of the car before I know what I've done. Stop!" The descending wolves turn to look at me, and I hear a warning snarl from Gabriel. If he was in his human form I'm sure he would be yelling at me to get back in the car, but I can't make myself do it. "

Leave them be – I'm the one you want."

I'd like to say I sounded strong or brave in this moment. Instead, I'm speaking through tears with the hoarse tone of a woman who's just been violently ill. I'm sure I look as intimidating and powerful as a door-mouse, with blood seeping down my cheek,

and my hands shaking with fear.

One of the wolves who stayed in his human form comes forward with a cruel grin. "I'm glad to see you've come to your senses." He tells me smugly. Unfortunately though, we can't have any witnesses, can we?"

He nods to the wolves by Gabriel, and I scream when they lunge forward and tear their teeth and claws into his tender belly. Blood and organs spill out of him, and I charge for the wolf who gave the order, trying to claw his eyes out with every ounce of wrath I possess. He catches me around the waist, laughing at my rage. I thrash against him, calling him every foul name I can think of, threats and curses pouring from my tongue.

I'm still wriggling and fighting when they push me into the car, and though I should be trying to escape, all I want to do is destroy them. "Goddess she's a pill." The man in charge mutters, climbing into the car after me. I Snarl and lunge for him, but he cocks his fist back and brings it down on my head, knocking me out cold.

Chapter 127 – Sinclair Comes Home

Sinclair

The battle lasted for hours. By the time we reached the border, rogues were already pouring into the territory. I fanned my men out in a wide net to intercept them, hoping that Hugo, Roger and my other squadron leaders were doing the same at the other borders.

This was the first time I'd been in a fight without Gabriel and Sean, and though I was confident my warriors were up to the task, it felt strange to be in battle without them. Of course it was completely worth it, I wouldn't trust Ella with anyone else.

Just before the fighting began, I forced myself to put Ella and the baby out of my thoughts. If I let myself worry about them I would be distracted from the battle, and that could be deadly. What's more, if I focused on my sweet mate or what she might think of the violence I was committing, I might not be able to do what was necessary to win. War is brutal and ruthless – there's no room for softness or tender feelings, and Ella inspires nothing but.

I told myself that I'd let myself feel the toll of violence when it was over. I had to turn off my emotions in the moment in order to protect my pack and my family, and I could live with the callousness of being a cold-blooded killing machine for a few hours. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I failed.

I lost count of how many rogues I killed, how many lives I ended with nothing more than my fangs. As the fighting dragged on, I focused only on the next step, the next target. I took my fair share of blows, becoming beaten and bruised as the night continued.

Claws sliced into my ribs, teeth dragged down my back, and my own blood and sweat blended with the mud and fluids of dying rogues.

When it was all over the earth suddenly seemed too quiet. I'd gotten so used to the sounds of aggression and pain, the blood rushing in my own ears, that I worried something might be wrong with my hearing. Shaking myself, I recall that the wilderness should be serene and still – if anything is abnormal it's the blood soaking into the ground as far as the eye can see.

I look around the forest, watching my wolves patrol for signs of survivors with a sense of grim pride. It hadn't been easy, but we did our job. For the first time I take an inventory of my own injuries, noticing the lingering pain in my ribs, and the beginning of a wicked bruise on my leg.

I can't relax until I know that the other fights succeeded as well, so I shift and race back to the car to retrieve my phone. Roger, Hugo and the other commanders all sent

messages saying that their areas were secure, and the former two are already on their way here to provide backup in case we need it. I call them off, instead turning to the reporters who followed us into the field, filming the battle.

I look into the nearest camera, trying to hide my impatience. I want to send the pack reassurance, but I need to get back to Ella too. I know she made it to the safe house alright and that nothing will happen as long as they're there, but this entire ordeal has been incredibly unnerving.

"I'm pleased to report that the invasion has been successfully stopped. My enforcers have pushed back and eliminated the rogue threat, with minimal losses on our side. I will provide more details in the hours and days to come, but I want to assure everyone that Moon Valley is safe, and the all clear signal will be issued as soon as possible."

The reporter standing next to the cameraman frowns, raising his hand to his ear.

"Alpha, headquarters is saying the all clear was already given – hours ago."

"What?" I demand, my face crumpling into a grimace. "That's not possible."

"I don't know how it happened, but they're certain. It doesn't sound like anyone took it seriously because they could see from our footage that the threat was ongoing, but the signal was definitely given."

I pause, trying to wrap my head around this idea. The only people in the territory who can issue emergency orders (or call them off) are myself, the Alpha council and the King. As I process this, something else occurs to me. Everyone with access to technology would see the footage, but we keep the sirens and all clear signal systems for people who don't or who aren't connected in the moment.

My safe houses are technology free for very good reason – because when the Prince attempted to assassinate my father, the hitman tracked him through his devices.

A horrible possibility enters my head then. If the all clear went out then Gabriel and Sean would have followed protocol and taken Ella home.

What if our fears were right, and this was a distraction? My wolf growls. If the King can call for the all clear the Prince probably found a way to use his father's authority to give the order, and then Ella would have come out of hiding.

Damn it, this is Lydia's doing! I think bitterly. She knows our protocols, she knows the systems. If everyone else was still inside hunkering down, the Prince's men could have intercepted Ella or waited for her at the house, and no one would notice a thing.

"I have to go." I declare gruffly, turning on my heel and striding back to the cars. I call Hugo and Roger and brief them along the way, beyond furious with myself for not foreseeing this possibility. They try to assure me that it's probably nothing, but I won't have it. I can feel that something is wrong in my gut.

We race back to the city, breaking every speed limit possible along the way. I'm silently praying to the Goddess the whole journey, begging her to let me be wrong.

Of course, I wasn't wrong.

When we get back to the house, I discover one of the guards in charge of protecting

Ella lying in a bloody heap on the doorstep. "Alpha." He groans, clutching a wound in his stomach. "I'm sorry."

"Shit, help him." I order, slipping my hands under his arms while Hugo takes his feet and we cart him inside. We lay him out on the couch and Roger leaves to call for a doctor. "Jeremy, where are the others?" I ask sharply, trying to stay calm even though I'm fairly certain my entire world is about to end.

"Dead." He moans, tears burning in his eyes. "Gabriel, Sean... they're all dead."

"What happened?" I inquire, my hands clenched in fists at my sides. He hadn't said

Ella's name, but if her protectors are dead and she's not here... only a fool would hold onto hope in such circumstances.

"They ambushed us, surrounded us so we had no choice but to fight." He coughs, and crimson liquid stains his lips. "We were so outnumbered... we never stood a chance. And then Ella... they were about to kill Gabriel and she must have known we'd lost. She got out of the car and told them to leave us alone, she gave herself up to save us."

That did it. The leash I'd been holding on my emotions snapped as my entire world shattered. An agonized roar bursts from my lips, and I crash to my knees, unable to believe my ears. I've never known such pain, to not only lose my mate but our pup, and to think it happened when I left her alone. No! She can't be gone. My wolf howls desperately. I would feel it, I would sense it. I don't believe this. I spiral into denial right along with him, it can't be true. It's too horrible. What was she thinking – impossible, noble little fool. Why would she sacrificed herself!

"They killed Gabriel anyway, and she was so furious... she just attacked them." He shakes his head, as if he still can't believe how fearless she'd been. "I'm so sorry,

Alpha." He groans, "they took her."

I've entered a strange fog, and it takes me a moment to understand. My head jerks up, 'Wait a minute – they took her?'

'Yes.' He nods, 'They put her in the car and drove off.'

'They didn't kill her?' I demand, needing to be certain I understood him correctly.

'If they did, they didn't do it in front of me.' He murmurs regretfully.

'Dominic?' Roger says, looking at me with obvious concern.

'This is Lydia.' I hiss. 'The Prince isn't this strategic.' A moment ago it had felt as though everything I knew and loved was breaking into a million tiny pieces, but now the destruction halts. Nothing is fixed or restored, the collapse is simply stalled, with my heart hanging in the balance. Now the ridiculous kernel of hope burgeoning in my chest surges forward, and I find myself forming a plan. 'I want to talk to them – right fucking now!'

Chapter 128 – Ella wakes

Ella

When I wake, I'm amazed to realize I'm alive. I was sure the Prince's men were going to kill me.

My hands immediately got to my middle, running over my slight baby bump with urgency. Everything feels normal, but I wish I had Sinclair's link with our pup. I wish I could feel what he's feeling, know for sure that he's unharmed. I'm sure the events of the last 12 hours or so haven't helped my preeclampsia, and I'm worried for my son.

Even as I think this, a tiny thump meets my palm, and I clamp my eyes shut with relief. "Hello angel." I greet him gently. "You can tell Mommy's freaking out, huh?" Another kick flutters beneath my hand and I hiccup with unshed tears. "I love you so much." I whisper. "I'm going to find a way out of this, I promise."

After my baby, Sinclair is my greatest concern. Fear for my mate permeates the fog of confusion, worry and grief consuming my overwrought mind. At best he'll be beside himself with guilt and rage that we've been taken. At worst he never made it out of the battle at all. I'd been anxious for his well being when the all clear rang out, but now I realize we might have lost.

I stagger to my feet, cradling my stomach and wincing as a dozen aches and pains assail me all at once. I hadn't noticed them when I was lying down, but upright I feel as though I've been flattened by a steamroller. My vision blacks out as blinding pain pierces my skull, and muscles I didn't even know I possessed are screaming at my brain, my eviscerated nerve endings begging we cease moving. I slump back onto the edge of the bed, trying to breathe through the agony.

Of course, as soon as I close my eyes, images of all my slaughtered guards fill my mind. I moan as I recall Sean's remorse in the second before he dies, and Gabriel's agonized howl as his insides were spilled into the pavement. I'm so lost in my thoughts that I barely hear the door open. "Oh good. You're up." Lydia's familiar and wretched voice cuts through my thoughts and I crack my eyelids open to see the she-wolf prowling into the room with a smug smirk on her face. "How are you liking your rooms?"

For the first time I look around and realize I must be in the Royal Palace, because my surroundings are actually quite lovely. "What, no dungeons?" I quip snarkily, trying not to let her see how much pain I'm in.

I'm baffled at how Lydia could possibly march in here sounding like an attentive hostess when I've just been kidnapped, but she manages without any visible difficulty. "Don't be silly. You're a Luna. We have to show you due respect... even if you are a conniving little whore." Lydia announces, sounding more and more bitter with every word out of her

mouth.

“More like you need to keep me in good condition so that Dominic doesn’t gut you like a fish when he finds me.” I counter sharply. It’s mostly a test, a trick to get her to reveal Sinclair’s fate. If she tells me he’s dead, I’m not sure I’ll believe her – surely I would feel it if he was no longer here? Still, if she acknowledges that he’s still alive then at least I know there’s hope.

Lydia snorts. “You don’t get it, do you?” She snipes. “Dominic isn’t going to find you at all.” A stab of fear stops my heart, but it eases as she continues. “And this isn’t some shoddy shake down. We’re brokering a deal, and you’re simply out ace in the hole. I think you’ll find it’s all very civilized. Just wait, in a few weeks, you’ll be back with Dominic safe and sound.”

Relief and distrust war for control in my heart, and my wolf snarls at her suggestion. “Civilized?” I grit out. “Is that what you call hiring rogues to attack your own people and murdering my guards?”

“I call that an unfortunate necessity – collateral damage.” Lydia shrugs, showing so little concern for the loss of human life I wonder if she has a heart at all.

“And what exactly am I supposed to leverage for you? If you expect Dominic to give up his life for mine then you’re going to be sorely disappointed.” I bluff, smothering a terrible feeling that this isn’t actually true. I’d like to think that Sinclair knows his survival is much more important than my own, but matters of the heart rarely bend to logic.

Lydia scoffs, “Of course he would. Dominic has always been too noble for his own damned good. Besides – weren’t you listening. I said you’d be together. We just need him to give up his campaign, that’s all.”

I shake my head. “What the hell happened to make you this way? Don’t you care about what will happen to the pack if the Prince wins? To all the packs?” I hiss, not understanding how anyone who had been part of the Sinclair family – who believe in nothing if not selfless duty – could be so heartless.

Lydia rolls her eyes, “Why should I care about a bunch of commoners – I’ll be on the throne.”

“You can’t control him, you know.” I warn, feeling only the tiniest ounce of concern for the psychotic creature in front of me. “He beat his last wife, only a fool would think he’ll be different with you.”

Lydia turns her nose up. “Angeline was weak, she didn’t know how to manage him like I do.” She reasons stubbornly.

“And your own husband?” I demand. “What will he have to say about this?”

Lydia blanches. “He’s out of sight and out of mind. The Prince outranks him, he can dissolve our marriage when the time comes.”

I don’t miss the flicker of uncertainty on her lovely face, and I store away that knowledge for the future. “Is power really worth all this?” I inquire, gesturing to the rooms around us. “You’ve been seeking it your whole life, and where has it gotten you? Are you happy, Lydia?”

She bares her teeth at me. “Happiness means security, and security means power. If you had any idea what it feels like to be powerless you might understand that. But no – here you are having skated through like on your looks, everything and everyone falling at your feet because you’re perfect Ella,” She sneers, “but it doesn’t work that way for everyone. I’ve had to struggle, I’ve had to fight every day for what I have.”

It takes all my willpower not to laugh in her face. She’s far from the first person to assume I’ve had a charmed life because of my beauty, but this is the first time anyone has ever been quite so far off the mark.

“You know, I find that those who have truly struggled tend to learn a little empathy. It’s only the self-centered narcissists who try to blame their cruelty on being a victim.” I observe coolly.

“How dare you -” Lydia begins, color flooding her face where moments before she had been as pallid as a sheet.

“How dare I what?” I interrupt, mocking her haughty demeanor, “Tell you a truth you don’t want to hear? Tell me what is your great tragedy? Have you never gotten over being born as one of the dirty commoners you so revile?”

Never got over your jealousy that some people were born luckier, and so you decided to steal what they had? Or is it your infertility? Is that what all this hatred comes down to? The fact that I am giving Dominic what you never could?”

I’m not proud of myself for this. I promised myself a long time ago that I would never assume I knew someone’s pain based on appearances, or weaponize their heartbreaks. Even with Lydia, I’ve always refused to bring up her fertility struggles, knowing how difficult these things are. But today she pushed me too far. She killed my guards, she probably cost Sinclair any number of his men, and she would have thrown the entire valley to the rogues – shifters and humans alike -the elderly, women and children.

Before I realize what she’s about, Lydia storms forward and slaps me across the face

with all her strength. My head snaps back, my ears ringing, but when the shock passes and I look up at the fuming woman above me, I only blink. "Is that the best you can do?"

Lydia screeches and lunges for me, her claws extended in threat. I brace myself for the impact, wondering what I was thinking, pushing her so far when I don't have a wolf to defend myself. Just then a masculine voice interrupts her, "Lydia!" We both freeze, looking to the open doorway and the man framed at its center.

The Prince has arrived.

"How dare you -" Lydia begins,

Chapter 129 – Ella Plays Politics

Ella “What the hell are you doing?” The Prince snaps, his usually cold features alight with rage. He storms forward, aggression pouring off him in waves.

“Nothing!” Lydia squeaks, whirling around and adopting an innocent expression. “I-she...” The she-wolf stammers, red faced and shaking.

‘You’re the one who went on and on about leaving the bitch unharmed so as not to further provoke Dominic!’ Prince Damon rumbles furiously. He looks down at me with cold disinterest, and I immediately recognize that I’m dealing with two very different kind of monsters here. Lydia is pure cunning and lacks any sense of conscience, she’ll do anything and hurt anyone to achieve her goals. The Prince however, he gives off the energy of a man who enjoys hurting others – not as a means to an end, but for the pure pleasure it inspires.

I look back to Lydia, still too angry to bite my tongue and wanting his attention anywhere but on me. “Or maybe she just meant those rules for you. I get the sense she expects special treatment – even above royalty.”

I watch as my word lands, feeling more than a little smug when Prince Damon sneers. “Leave us.”

Lydia gapes, horrified to be ordered away. “But-”

“I said leave.” He repeats fiercely. Lydia hurries out grumbling under her breath, and my heart clenches with newfound anxiety. Maybe it was my inner wolf, but I felt the strongest compulsion to challenge Lydia, to establish dominance. Of course, I feel no respect for the Prince, but my instincts warn me that he has no qualms about hurting me. In fact, I’m sure he would enjoy it. Lydia might want to harm me, but she attempted to show restraint in the interest of avoiding Sinclair’s wrath, but I have the impression the Prince has never had an impulse he didn’t indulge.

At the same time, I don’t want to show him any weakness. Next to Sinclair, he’s nothing, and the more my wolf comes out, the more determined I feel not to submit to anyone but my mate. So instead of cowering, I give him my defiance. Notching my chin up, I glare at the despicable man. ‘This won’t work, you know.’ I tell him, wondering if I’ve lost my mind. “Dominic will never give up the campaign for me.”

‘You doubt his devotion so much?’ prince Damon remarks, arching a brow.

“Would you have given up the throne to save your mate?” I ask curiously, a new idea occurring to me now. If I can sow discord between Lydia and the Prince, maybe I can distract them enough to escape. He doesn’t have any clue that Lydia is probably responsible for the Princess’s death, but if anything could tear them apart – that will.

“Of course not – but Dominic is a sentimental fool.” The Prince chortles to himself. “We are a completely different caliber of wolf.”

“I agree.” I state simply, knowing he probably won’t catch the inference that my mate is far superior. ‘Though I am sorry for your loss.’ I share, channeling the sympathy I feel for his motherless children, if not for himself. “It was such a shocking death – and poison!” I exclaim. ‘What kind of man deploys such a cowardly weapon? Do you have any leads on the suspect?’ I worry I might be laying it on too thick, but when he doesn’t bat an eye, I know I need to press harder.

“I’m not here to talk about Angeline.” He grits out, beginning to pace back and forth in front of me. “And if you think you can help yourself by playing on my own loss, you’re sorely mistaken.”

‘That wasn’t my intention.’ I refute honestly. “I just thought it was interesting that she was killed in such a feminine manner.”

“Feminine?” He repeats, bewildered. “Are you saying you think a woman killed her?” His eyes narrow and too late I realize that he’ll probably assume I’m trying to take credit, ‘You?’

“Of course not!” I hold up my hands. “I’ve been on bed rest, and besides, why would I help your campaign? I don’t stand to gain anything by making you a winner.”

I hope I’ve said enough to get the gears working in his tiny brain. I don’t want to come out and accuse Lydia. He’ll assume I’m making things up to distract him or help myself somehow. Of course, that’s exactly what I’m doing, but it’s also true. He needs to reach the conclusion on his own.

‘Then who?’ He inquires, as if I’m not the one who’s been asking the questions.

‘Well, who would benefit?’ I ask simply, folding my hands in my lap. I try to telepathically force Lydia’s name into his thoughts, but I’m not sure it’s successful.

He pauses thoughtfully, then he shakes his head, disappointing me. “I don’t have time for this. I came to tell you not to get any bright ideas about escaping. We’re calling a meeting with Dominic. If he agrees to our ransom then you’ll be back home in no time, so just sit tight and behave yourself. We even brought your things for you from the scene of the accident.” He gestures to the go-bag I’d taken to the safehouse, which now sits on the bureau.

“The accident?” I repeat coldly. ‘You mean the kidnapping? How did you even cover it up? A confrontation of the size, with all that noise?’

He snorts, 'The pack was under lockdown, and we it was on a block in the commercial center with no residences.'

"How did you even know we'd be there?" I hiss.

'We set up a full perimeter around Sinclair's mansion, we just got lucky with the route you chose. There were no witnesses to silence, and we cleared it so well no one will ever know anything happened there.'

I cross my arms over my chest, beyond outraged that he's getting away with so much violence and corruption. All the while Sinclair plays by the rules, even though the odds are stacked against him. I once asked him why he didn't publicly accuse the Prince of his crimes, and he merely answered that we didn't have a leg to stand on without proof. The Prince would call it a smear campaign and Sinclair would look weak for lobbing accusations rather than taking action to stop him. There are just some things I'll never understand about wolves, but I suppose I know better than to think an accusation can stand alone. How many powerful men in the human world have actually been held accountable for their crimes when there isn't evidence against them?

"Fine. I won't do anything stupid." I finally agree. "Is that all?"

"For now." He says, looking me up and down one final time before stalking out. "And Ella," he adds, pausing at the door. "If you do try to get away... I will make you regret it."

"I believe you." I reply, smothering the urge to shiver.

When he's gone I creep after him on tiptoe, hoping I might be able to hear something through the door. Sure enough, after a few moments I hear his voice raised with Lydia's as they argue in the hallway. "She doesn't think it will work!" He growls in an accusatory tone.

"Of course she says that. She's trying to throw us off. Besides, we know this was a possibility." Lydia counters reasonably. "If he refuses the ransom and tries to stage a rescue we'll simply plan another ambush.

Either way, we get rid of him."

'This had better work.' The Prince snarled.

"It will, you'll see, Damon. You can trust me." Lydia simpers, and I can imagine her batting her lashes at him.

"Can I? It seems you've been getting a lot of perks out of this friendship of ours." He

observes, and a flash of triumph pulses inside me.

“What are you suggesting?” Lydia’s offended voice replies.

The Prince growls, “I’ve got my eye on you.” I hear his footsteps retreating, and then Lydia’s shaky breath.

Just in case she decides to come back, I move away from the door, heading straight for my go bag. I don’t think I have anything inside which might help me out of this situation, but it’s worth double checking.

I pull out my clothing and toiletries, doing a quick inventory of the items. I shake my head with disappointment as I sort through the bag, but there at the bottom is the ornate tin holding the herbs to trigger my wolf’s awakening. I’ve been keeping them with me at all times – just in case – and when we packed for the safe house I tossed in the tin, I clasp it tightly in my hand, wondering if I’d somehow known I might need to defend my life in the near future.

I press my hand to my belly, feeling guilty for even considering it. I’m not in any imminent danger, though I am terrified about what I just heard between Lydia and the Prince. I know our situation just got incomprehensibly worse, but I’m not so desperate that I think I need to waken my wolf. At least... not yet.

Chapter 130 – The Prince’s Ransom

Sinclair

I’d been ready to storm the Royal Palace when I learned the Prince had taken Ella, and if I had been sure of her location, I would have already done it. It would be the very definition of hubris to imprison her within his own home, though I don’t put anything past the Prince. More importantly, my mate and my pup’s lives hang in the balance, and I can’t be too careful.

After I calmed down enough to stop envisioning all the ways I’d like to maim the other man, I had Hugo call in my best warriors, even though they’ve only just come off the battlefield. Next to Gabriel, Sean and the rest of the slaughtered team, the chosen men are the best fighters I can assemble at my back – and I have no doubt I’m going to need them. When they arrived I was still too rabid to conjure actual words, so Hugo explained the situation to them. I watch the horror and outrage spread across their weary faces and I’m touched when – one by one – they all stand and promise me their allegiance in the fight ahead.

I didn’t even have to ask, and a tiny part of me had been afraid they would view the assault on my mate as a reflection of my own weakness. It was bad enough that the Prince was able to find enough rogues to take on the city, and now this? What kind of Alpha can’t even protect his mate? I feel like an utter failure for not keeping Ella and Rafe safe, for not considering that the royal family might declare the danger passed in order to target my mate.

My wolf hasn’t stopped howling in my head, in between bursts of deadly snarls and pitiful whines, he simply howls and howls as if he’s hoping her own wolf might hear him telepathically. He’s drowning in his pain, but I’m drowning in my guilt. I promised she would always be safe and I couldn’t do it. Goddess only know what they’re doing to her at this very moment.

My father is here too – he came at Roger’s request after we arrived home, and I’m grateful for his steady presence. My own wolf might be on the verge of going completely berserk, but I know my father will talk me down if I start to truly lose it. He must think I’m nearing that point, because he wheels over and rests his hand over mine. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop. Beating yourself up about this won’t help anything.” He frowns sympathetically, letting me know he understands even though he’s not going to condone my wallowing. “Ella needs your strength, not your self-pity.”

I nod, appreciating his calm reminder. Feeling sorry for myself won’t fix anything. “I’ve already called the Prince’s beta.” Hugo is explaining to the men. “They’ve asked for a meeting, and we agreed to let them set the time if we set the place. We won’t release the location until fifteen minutes before the rendezvous.”

“What’s the plan once we’re there?” The biggest wolf in the group asks. “Are they bringing her along?”

“Unlikely.” Hugo sighs, ‘This is just to collect intelligence. They’re probably going to request a ransom, and we need to try and glean as much information as we possibly can in the meantime. Everybody needs to be observing every detail possible – the words he uses, the way he organizes his own guards. Watch their facial expressions as the Alpha’s speak, try to pick up on any ticks or body language that might hint at a clue to her location or their plans.”

“When is the meet?” The same guard inquires, nodding along with the instructions.

“It’s in half an hour, which means we only have a little while to prepare. I know it’s soon, but we didn’t want to give them any time to scheme further or try to figure out the destination in advance. It means we don’t have time to set up an ambush as well, which is unfortunately a concession we had to make.”

“But we can call for backup.” Another wolf suggests, “I bet you they’ll do exactly the same thing once they know where it is.”

“We will, but this is a very delicate situation. In all likelihood they’ve set up some kind of contingency in the event that the Prince doesn’t return from the meeting or they take too long before checking in. Your Luna’s life is at stake – we can’t be too careful.” Hugo explains.

I step forward, pleased to see how eager my men are to help. “I appreciate your dedication and your bravery tonight. We’ve already been through hell in the last few hours, and I want to make sure that everyone here is up to another fight if things come to a head. This isn’t the time to play the hero – if you’re too exhausted, injured or simply unable to be at your best, tell me now. I don’t want any more unnecessary bloodshed.”

The first man steps forward, a hard look on his face. “All do respect, Alpha, but Gabriel trained me, he was one of the best fighters I’ve ever seen, and he saved my life more than once over the years. That cowardly bastard probably had to outnumber them five to one just to take him out. And targeting a breeding she-wolf is as low as it gets. I won’t step a toe out of line, but I’d be lying if I said I’m not hoping he’ll give us a reason to cut him down where he stands.”

“I agree.” The wolf beside him nods, “We all want to make him pay, and we’ll be damned if we’re going to let you go in there alone.”

“Thank you.” I profess earnestly, feeling genuinely touched by their support. “Now let’s move out.”

By the time the Prince arrives at the meeting point half an hour later, I've got more than a hundred wolves spread out around the periphery of the scene, just waiting to move in or track the Prince after he leaves. When Damon enters, sniffing at our surroundings – a deserted warehouse in the old industrial district – I can't stop myself from prowling forward with lethal intent.

"Where is she?" I thunder, feeling as though my wolf is clawing at my skin, actually spilling my blood in his desperation to get out."

"Uh, uh, uh," The prince mocks, wagging his finger at me. "If anything happens to me, I guarantee you'll never see her again."

"What the hell are you up to?" I change course, my gaze flitting to the bastion of guards at his back. He's got about a dozen men around him, but I know his guards are second-rate fighters compared to my own men.

It would be so easy. My wolf suggests hungrily. He could be dead in an instant, and then we could hold his men hostage and torture them until they tell us where she is.

The Prince is eyeing me closely, undoubtedly reading my bloodthirsty thoughts. "You should know I've arranged to check in with your mate's guards every fifteen minutes like clockwork. If they don't receive my call – they'll kill her and your unborn whelp."

I silently curse. We figured something like this would happen, but it's still fucking inconvenient. "I see you've been taking pointers from my ex-wife." I remark harshly, hoping to piss him off enough to put a dent in their alliance. "I didn't think you had it in you to take a woman's advice... then again, when she's ten times smarter than you are, you'd be a fool not to. Still, it's a bit embarrassing – don't you think?"

Damon's face flushes with color, and his jaw clenches tight. "I admit she's a tiresome creature, but even I have to admit she's had a few good ideas... like this one."

"And what was her brilliant idea? To distract me with the rogues, to make me look like a fool for losing my mate?" I inquire, prodding for information more than anything else.

The Prince scowls. "You're going to give up your campaign, Dominic.

Resign, abdicate – whatever you want to call it. Take yourself out of the running and leave the territory. If you do that, I'll give your little mate back and you two can run off in the sunset together."

"Why should I believe you'd actually return her to me?" I press. My insides have been tied into knots since this all began, but they clench even tighter now, settling in my stomach like rocks.

“Because I am nothing if not a man of honor.” The Prince replies haughtily, “You have my word that she will be safe and sound as long as you play by my rules, Dominic.”

“I don’t believe you.” I say sharply, even though I have no intention of agreeing to his ludicrous terms.

‘You should. I’ve shown her nothing but kindness so far and I’ll continue to do that.’ He shrugs. “I have nothing against either of you as people – the problem is that you’re in my way.” He growls, his eyes flashing. ‘You have always been in my way.’ 1

“How do I know she’s really unharmed? She could be in some dungeon at this very moment, suffering Goddess only knows what.” I snap. “If I’m going to consider this offer, I want proof of life.”

“Alright.” He shrugs. “Give me 24 hours. We can set another meet. I’ll bring proof of life, and you can tell me your decision. Just no that if you say no to me – I’ll kill her faster than you can blink.”

Chapter 131 – Ella Dreams of Sinclair

Ella

Sleep! I beg my manic wolf. You have to keep your strength up! We need sleep!

I can't rest when there's danger. She argues stubbornly, and though I'm frustrated, I understand. I'm so exhausted with fear, anxiety, and pregnancy that I'm barely hanging onto my sanity by a thread, but I know it's the right thing to do. I need to keep my wits about me.

I haven't heard anything since the Prince visited my rooms. The servants brought me food and fresh linens, but I didn't trust them enough to actually eat, and as comfortable as the bed looks, it's a far cry from my beloved nest. I don't feel safe here, so how am I ever supposed to let my guard down enough to rest?

If only I could talk to Dominic, to know that he's alright and warn him about what I learned. As soon as the thought enters my mind, I realize what a fool I've been. There is a way! Of course there is!

I pull one of the blankets off the bed, scanning the room. I've circled the space about two dozen times already, memorizing every nook and cranny. Three guards are posted outside my door, and two more are posted on the ground below my third story window. In the end I clamber into the large wardrobe, needing to be hidden from sight – to feel walls around me even if they aren't truly strong enough to ward off an attack.

I toss and turn, trying to get comfortable and calm my wolf. My mind is still reeling, but the knowledge that I could soon be lost in a dream with my mate gives me the determination I need. When I open my eyes again, I'm in the same moonkissed forest I've visited in our other dream dates, and I pray that Sinclair has the sense to sleep too.

It happens slowly.

The more time that passes, the more I fear he's too frantic to rest, but after what feels like hours, I feel the air around me change, sparking with sudden electricity. I know he's here before I hear his voice, but it doesn't make the sound of his deep bass any less beautiful. "Ella!" Footsteps are racing towards me, and then I'm out of the bed in the trees, sprinting towards the sound of his voice.

When I see him I feel as though time itself slows down. My vision blurs with tears, and I'm crying out for him too, "Dominic!"

He's charging towards me beneath the stars, his ravenous gaze locked on me with such avid determination that part of me wants to turn and give chase – but I push those instincts far away. We're both wearing the same curious clothing that always appears on

us here, but the closer Sinclair comes, I can see he's got a black eye and fresh scratches covering his skin. I'm worried for the wounds hidden beneath his clothing, but he's alive – and he's here.

When he's only a few feet away, I launch myself into his arms, feeling not a single shred of pain as my battered body collides with his. Powerful arms lock around my body, clutching me so tightly I can't breathe, but I don't care. I want him to hold me even tighter, and so I cling to him with all my strength, wrapping my legs around his waist and burying my face in his neck. His scent fills my senses, and I'm crying with sheer relief. He's okay.

The huge Alpha is nuzzling and petting me, murmuring sweet nonsense as he trails his lips over my skin. "Ella, my Ella. I've been so worried." I can only whimper in reply, running my hands through his hair and hoping he can feel my love as powerfully as I can feel his. "Such a clever mate, to think of our dreams! So perfect, so sweet." He drops to his knees, and though I'm trying my best to fuse our bodies together, he begins tugging at my limbs, "I'm so sorry, my love. Are you alright?"

I whine and squeeze him tighter, but his inner caretaker has claimed full control and he drags my body away from him with utmost ease. "Let me see, let me look at you."

With an agonized expression, his eyes sweep over the gash where my head hit the window in the car, the black bruise on my temple where the wolves knocked me out, and the blooming blue shadow on my cheekbone from Lydia's slap. His wolf whines as if my pain is his own, and Sinclair studies and fusses over each mark, dotting them with kisses and murmurs of sympathy. "Poor baby, what have they done to you?"

'The baby.' I hiccup, shaking my head and dragging his palm to my belly. He lets me guide his movement, obviously equally concerned. "He's kicking but I can't tell... is he alright?"

Sinclair dips his head to my neck as he focuses on the pulses of energy through his bond with our son, nibbling the spot on my shoulder where he claimed me the last time we were here. "He's okay, but he's stressed." He finally confirms, "he can feel your anxiety."

It's not the best news, but it's still an incredible relief. I'd been terrified that he might have been injured in the crash. 'There,' Sinclair croons, stroking my tummy as he breathes in my scent. "You see, that's better already. Oh my sweet mate, you must have been so afraid."

"What about you?" I sniffle, "are you hurt? What happened in the battle?"

But Sinclair shakes his head, ignoring my question as he rises and carries me to the

bed. He pulls off my night dress, apparently determined to examine every inch of my body for injuries because he can focus on anything else.

He growls every time I try to object or push him away, running his hands over my bruises with featherlight tenderness, then following them with kisses.

I'm sorely reminded of a pet who can't be dissuaded from investigating every last scent on their owner's clothes after they come in from outdoors, albeit a very growly and affectionate one. Of course, I would ever voice such a comparison to Sinclair. He won't be satisfied until he's checked me from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet, switching back and forth between words of love and threats against the Prince. When he's finally finished, he pulls me into his lap and wraps me up in a tight embrace, purring intently.

"I want to look at you, too. It's my turn!" I complain anxiously, trying to wriggle enough to reach the buttons on his shirt. He huffs but eventually allows it, and I strip him the same way he stripped me, a fresh stab of pain slicing into me with every new scar and abrasion I find. His ribs are positively purple, and I feel guilty for squeezing him so tightly before. Still, when I try to keep my distance he simply reels me back in, holding me so tightly I have no hope of escape.

"How are you?" Sinclair inquires, still with such urgency despite the time which has passed since we reunited.

"Really?"

"I'm scared. For you, for me and the baby." I confess, "They killed Gabriel and the others just for trying to protect me. I gave myself up and they still killed them!"

Sinclair growls, but this time I sense a flash of anger directed towards me." They were always going to kill them, that's why you never ever surrender yourself. Never, you know better than that, Ella. What were you thinking?"

"I just couldn't stand there and do nothing!" I exclaim pitifully, hating his disappointment in me. I don't ever want Sinclair to be angry with me, but it hurts especially badly right now, when I only want cuddles and support.

"Yes you could!" He corrects me firmly. "And when I get you back I'm going to make sure you never consider doing anything so reckless again. Not for me, not for anyone." There's a threat in his voice, but the strange thing is that I find the suggestion of his dominance more calming than anything else. I suppose it tells me that he still loves me enough to care – not to give up on me for a single mistake. "What else?" He inquires, still in protector mode, needing to know every last detail.

A fresh wave of sobs threaten as I consider the things which have occurred since I arrived here. "Lydia's an abominable cow and the Prince is as dumb as a brick... and I miss my nest." I burst at the end, breaking down completely.

Sinclair clucks, purring louder for me. "I know, baby. I'm so sorry."

'Why is this happening?' I squeak after a minute, hating my weakness.

"The Prince is getting desperate." Sinclair answers, kissing my hair. "But don't worry, I'm going to make it right."

I'm going to come for you. Where is he keeping you?"

"I can't tell you." I state abruptly, thinking of the conversation I overheard earlier.

Sinclair stills, seeming to pick up on my sudden tension. "You can't tell me, or you don't know?" He clarifies.

"I know... but I can't tell you." I clarify, feeling the sudden urge to cower. I peek up at him from beneath my lashes and see the foreboding look on his handsome face. My wolf tucks her tail between her legs, but I dig in my heels.

"I won't tell you."

Sinclair growls, and I know I'm in big trouble.

Chapter 132 – Ella Warns Sinclair

Ella “What do you mean, you won’t tell me?” Sinclair rumbles, full of foreboding. He’s glowering down at me, emitting raw Alpha authority and unflinching disapproval. The idea that anyone would keep me from him – even me myself – seems to be more than he can handle. Still, I know I have to – if he comes after me the Prince will kill him.

I set my jaw trying to look fierce and determined, even though my wolf is whimpering in the face of his ire. “I won’t! I don’t care what you do or what you say, I’m not going to tell you.”

“Ella, what are you talking about? Why not?” Sinclair demands, his hands tightening reflexively on my body and then easing when he realizes how tightly he’s holding me.

“I heard the Prince and Lydia talking, they know you won’t give them their ransom. They think you’ll try to stage a rescue instead, and when you do, they’ll be waiting. It’s all a set up. If you come here they’ll kill you.” I whisper frantically, knowing this won’t dissuade him, but hoping my explanation will at least help him understand why I can’t answer his question.

Sinclair’s eyes glow neon green, and he bares his fangs, “So what would you have me do, Ella? Just leave you as his prisoner?” Before I can conjure any kind of response, he continues, “Not fucking likely, trouble.”

“I don’t have the answers.” I moan, leaning into him in hopes that he’ll calm down. Unfortunately he knows what I’m about, and keeps me at arm’s length, “I just know that rescue is not an option. I’m not going to let anyone else die for me – especially not you!” My throat is itching, my voice thick with emotion as I look up at my mate. “I can’t lose you, Dominic.”

“Sweetheart, if I know there’s an ambush waiting I can prepare for it.” Sinclair reasons, sounding gentler now. I think my upset has calmed his own temper, because he tucks my head under his chin and begins stroking my spine in long, soothing strokes. “I know you’re scared and you probably feel horribly guilty about your guards, but their deaths were the most honorable kind for a warrior. They joined my ranks because they wanted to defend the pack at all costs.”

“You didn’t see them.” I hiccup, “it wasn’t – they thought they’d failed. They died believing they hadn’t done their jobs, that they hadn’t protected me.”

He tsks, pressing his lips to my hair. “They will be remembered as heroes, Ella. They fought until the very end, even when the odds were so stacked against them that they knew they couldn’t win.”

“But I don’t want you to die too!” I cry. “I need you, the united packs need you.”

“Shhh, I have no plans of dying anytime soon.” Sinclair promises, caressing the curve of my belly. “But you need to tell me where you are so we can make a plan... so we can avoid that at all costs. Did you overhear Damon and Lydia because you’re in the Palace?”

I stubbornly shake my head. “I’ve made up my mind, Dominic.” I insist. “I’m better off in captivity than I would be if we lost you. Fear of you is the only thing keeping them from hurting me.”

Sinclair growls low and deep, brushing his thumb over the bruise on my cheek. “Is this what you call unhurt?”

I lean my face into his hand, nuzzling and nibble his palm, “it’s not so bad.” I insist, “A few bruises are nothing in the grand scheme.”

He grumbles, ‘They’re something to me, and he’s threatening to do much worse if I don’t end my campaign in the next 24 hours. We don’t have time to waste.’

“I’m sure he threatened to kill me, but even Damon isn’t that foolish. As long as you’re out there making life difficult for them, they’ll need to keep me as leverage.” I reason, hoping that I’m right.

‘That’s not a change I’m willing to take, Ella.’ Sinclair counters firmly. “And even if you are right, I can’t help you through this pregnancy if we’re separated. You’re already high risk, being a prisoner could make your condition even worse and endanger the baby.”

He’s using the baby against me. I realize, admiring his sly strategy. He knows I’ll let myself suffer, but the idea of our pup being harmed... I emit a pitiful moan, hating how right he is. ‘There has to be another way. Maybe I can escape on my own.’ The Prince’s threats ring in my mind, but I’m smart enough not to repeat these things to my mate. I know in my heart that if anyone is going to put themselves at risk, it should be me. The possibility of my baby’s death is too painful to contemplate, and my inner mama bear lashes out at the thought with primal rage. Still, Sinclair is the one who has to rule, he’s the one responsible for protecting millions of shifters and humans alike.

‘That’s an idea.’ Sinclair is watching me with narrowed eyes, and too late I realize he’s still got one hand on my tummy, no doubt channeling my feelings through the baby. “But what aren’t you saying, trouble? What aren’t you telling me?”

I summon a growl, hating his perceptiveness. “Look, if I try to escape and I’m caught, they might rough me up a bit, but they won’t kill me.” I assert, convinced the Prince wouldn’t give up such a powerful bargaining chip – or perhaps praying that I’m right, since I’m not willing to endanger Sinclair. “I’ll be able to try again. But if you try to rescue

me and they get the better of you, they'll kill you. The risk is less if I try to do this on my own."

Sinclair fumes, and his fists clench and unclench on my body. "Listen to me, now. We only have a few more hours to work this out, and one way or another, you need to tell me where you are. I'm not saying I'm going to ride in there on a white horse to save you, but I can't find solutions if I don't know the situation."

I peek up at him sulkily, feeling a ferocious desperation to keep him safe no matter what. "What time exactly do you have to give your answer? Are you meeting him in person?" I question, thinking that if I try to escape when the Prince is out of the house with all his guards, I might actually be able to succeed.

"Why?" Sinclair demands, his voice like gravel.

"Because I'm trying to figure this out." I reply vaguely, knowing he's getting more and more frustrated with me by the minute.

"Tell me where you are and I'll help you." He repeats forcefully, practically shaking with the effort it's taking to control his wolf. "This is not the time to test me, little one."

"No." I repeat stubbornly, not able to meet his eyes. "I've made up my mind, Dominic. I'm not going to tell you."

Sinclair's hand clamps around my nape with unrelenting force, pulling my reluctant gaze up to his own. "Let's get one thing straight, beautiful. You are not going to keep sacrificing yourself to protect the people around you – you've given up enough in your life and it is my job to make sure you never have to do that ever again. I couldn't prevent you from doing it with the guards, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let you do it for me." There's something feral in his emerald eyes, a wildness I've never before encountered. "I'm hate to do this, but you're really not giving me another choice."

At first I don't have the first clue what he means, but the next thing I know, a wave of ruthless dominance slams into me, nearly bending my body in two with the force of his power. I gasp in shock, not understanding, "I – What are you doing to me?"

"This is the authority I hold over other wolves." He growls unapologetically, "I don't enjoy using it against my mate, but I will if I have to. Now tell me where you are." He commands mercilessly.

To my shock and horror I feel the words rising up inside my throat, balancing on the tip of my tongue. I fight with all my strength, amazed and devastated that he might steal the words from my lips without my permission. I always knew Sinclair was powerful, but I've never felt the full force of his dominance before. I didn't realize he could force someone

to do something against their will, with only a few words.

“No!” I plead, tears streaming down my cheeks. “Please... don’t make me, they’ll kill you.”

‘Tell me.’ He says again, and to my misery, the force of his order only increases. I’m a begging, blubbering mess, but Sinclair doesn’t relent. I hate him for doing this to me, for making me say the words that might send him to his grave, but I can’t help myself. I’m powerless to stop him.

I feel my mouth opening, and then the words are spilling out.

Chapter 133 – Ella gets angry

Ella

“I’m in the Royal Palace.” I finally burst out. “The third floor, my windows look out over the southern gate... it’s a corner suite.”

At once the crushing weight of his orders dissipate, and I’m left a puddle in his arms. “Good girl.” Sinclair praises me, and I feel positively sick to my stomach. “It’s all going to be okay.”

I can’t stop crying. I’m beating my fists against Sinclair’s chest, angrier than I can ever remember being with him. “How could you, how could you?” I moan, my entire body shaking with the force of my weeping.

“I’m sorry, Ella.” He lets me attack him and never moves to defend himself, only holding me steady as I vent my feelings onto him. “When this is all over, I promise I’ll make it up to you, but I stand by what I said. You’re done hurting yourself for the sake of others.”

“But the world needs you! Not me!” I explode, finding it more and more difficult to take in air. “And what do you think they’ll do to me if you die? How is that going to help anything?”

“I need you, Ella.” Sinclair argues, “I need you as my mate, as the mother of my pups – my Luna. I’m not going to die, Ella.” Sinclair promises. “And neither are you. We’re not going to let him win, sweetheart.”

“You don’t know that!” I combat, heaving in another sob. “I will never forgive you for this, Dominic. Not for as long as I live.”

“The point is that you will live, trouble.” He murmurs, his lips against my temple. “That’s what matters most. I’d rather you hate me and live, than love me and die – and for that, I won’t apologize.”

“Well I do hate you!” I try to say, but it sounds about as fierce as a wounded butterfly.

“Do you really?” He inquires, a teasing note in his voice. “You don’t sound convinced.”

“Just don’t die.” I beg, and I realize that I stopped fighting him at some point. Now I’m clinging to him the same way I had been when he first arrived in my dream, and part of me wishes we could never leave this fantasy realm. We’re both safe here. I can be my wolf here without harming my baby, he can claim me and we can be together forever – just the three of us.

“Shh,” Sinclair croons, cuddling me to his chest. “We can work with the Palace, Ella.

There are passages in and out of the building intended for Royal emergencies. There's a chance there might be some in your rooms, and even if there aren't, I might be able to find some in order to get inside."

"But how are we supposed to tell each other if we're able to find one?" I sniffle, more confused than anything else. "It was hard enough to fall asleep the first time – I'm in a cupboard."

"A cupboard?" Sinclair repeats, a note of amusement in his voice.

"It felt safer than anything else." I defend hotly, knowing he probably can't understand the logic of my swirling hormones and trauma. "The point is that I can't guarantee I'll be able to fall asleep again, and neither of us has any time to waste. You can't plan if you're asleep."

"Well, I can tell you this much," Sinclair muses aloud. "The safest option for everyone would be if you can find a passageway. Often the royal family are the only ones who know they exist, which means they won't be guarded.

Moreover, they're used for evacuations, which means they lead outside the palace walls."

"Really?" I whisper, my tears slowing now.

"You see, sometimes telling me the truth has its benefits." Sinclair states, only slightly smug. The worst part is that he's right. I always feel better after I've come clean to him about my secrets, and the cocky bastard knows it.

"How do you know all this?" I inquire curiously.

"You forget that my father was almost King once, and we keep very close ties with the pack elders. Besides, the royal family and the Moon Valley Alpha are supposed to function as each other's backup in times of emergency – we know the protocols for evacuation and everything else in case the worst happens, even if we don't know the specifics."

"But what if there aren't any passages in my room?" I ask nervously, knowing it will mean I have to wait for his rescue.

"Then I come to you." Sinclair shrugs. "Hopefully you'll be able to get out before that's necessary. If you can escape then you can get in contact and let us know to call it off."

"Call what off?" I fret, blinking up at him with wide eyes.

“The Prince is waiting until the end of the day to hear from me. I’ll set the meet and tell him the location fifteen minutes before the planned rendezvous – just like we did the ransom meeting.” I’m surprised to hear that Sinclair already met with the man, and that the Prince is still standing afterwards, then again, he has a very strong trump card as long as I’m in his grasp. “But instead of going to the meeting, my men and I will infiltrate the palace. I’ll reach out to Adolpho and see if he knows any of the passage entrances.”

“And if he doesn’t?” I press, seeing far too many ways for this situation to go wrong.

Sinclair drops a quick succession of kisses to my cheek. “You’re just determined to poke holes aren’t you? If he doesn’t then we’ll do this the old fashioned way and go over the walls. If you find a passage then leave some sort of hint for us in your room – draw the curtains closed and unmake the bed.”

“Why, if you get there and it’s empty then won’t you know that I managed to get out?” I object, trying to follow his logic.

“No, they could move you to another location, or we could end up in the wrong room thinking it’s yours and accidentally leave you behind. If we arrive and see the room in that state, we’ll know we’re in the right place but we need to retreat. Is there anything else distinctive about your room? A color scheme, or something?”

“The walls are green.” I share, “and there are yellow flowers on the armoire.”

“Okay, that’s even better.” Sinclair nods. “Actually, it would be good if you can try to leave some sort of clue about where the passage was – so we can follow you out that way and catch up.”

I shake my head in awe, not understanding how he can be so calm about all this. Our very lives are on the line, but Sinclair is the cool and collected strategist, working out the problem as if it’s a jigsaw puzzle. “What kind of clue?”

He pauses to think. “Is there anything in your room you can use to write a coded message?”

“I think there’s a notepad and pen by the desk.” I recall.

“Then write a message to the prince, but spell out the location of the passage using the first letter of every sentence.” He instructs, and I can see the gears whirring in his mind.

“Okay, where should I look for passages?” I inquire, trying to picture the opulent bedroom.

“Start with any furniture or decorations against the walls – the back of your cupboard,

paintings, fireplaces. Pull down vases, cot hooks, anything that might trigger a wall opening. Do the same in the bathroom. Pay attention to scuffs on the floor from sliding furniture, or drafts of air. If that doesn't work then just start pushing on the walls – you remember the entrance to the safehouse?" I nod, and he continues. "It could be a pressure sensor like that."

"How can you possibly be so calm about this?" I breathe, feeling my pulse fluttering in my veins.

"I'm not calm, Ella." Sinclair corrects me, looking down to meet my gaze. Sure enough, I see fire blazing in his brilliant irises, and a muted rage I know he's saving for the Prince. "Trust me, I'm the farthest thing in the world from calm, but the best thing I can do to help you right now is figure out a plan, so that's what I'm doing."

I nod, clenching my eyes shut. "How much time do we have?" I inquire, having a bad feeling that our reprieve is coming to an end.

"If you don't have any more questions then I should go." Sinclair says regretfully. "I wish it was otherwise, but I need to start getting plans in motion, and you need to start searching for your escape."

"Okay," I murmur, trying not to fall apart again.

"I love you, trouble." Sinclair replies, tilting my face up to his and claiming a deep kiss.

"I love you too." I answer, just in case this all goes terribly wrong. I don't want to let my earlier proclamation of hate to stand. "I'm sorry I said -"

"I know," He assures me, kissing me again. "It's going to be okay. Now wake up – the sooner you do, the sooner we can be together again."

I wake with tears in my eyes, but with fresh determination. I climb out of the wardrobe, and begin the hunt.

Chapter 134 – Ella Finds a Passage

Ella

I wipe the tears from my face and scan the room, Sinclair's voice ringing in my mind. I'm still upset with him for making me share my location, but I'm determined to escape before he can endanger himself coming after me. If there's a way out of this room, I'm going to find it. i Let me help! My wolf requests eagerly, as exhilarated with adrenaline as I am.

You are helping. I roll my eyes. Whose instincts do you think I'm using here? Certainly not my useless human ones.

And it's true, The stronger my wolf has become, the stronger all of my senses have become. My ears are cocked for the sounds of anyone approaching the room, my eyes are hawkishly raking over every nook and cranny in the bedroom, searching for the tiniest details on the walls and floors. My nose is scenting the air, trying to determine if there are strange draughts of air beyond the interiors of the small space.

More than anything, I'm tapping into the strange and mysterious gut feelings which have recently been becoming more and more pronounced, hoping this sixth sense will help point me in the right direction. These are all things I wouldn't have been able to do before – at least not in the same level of sharpness.

I pat my belly. "Mommy has a silly wolf, Rafe." The canine in question snorts in my head, Not as silly as his fathers.

You may have a point there. I remark fondly, thinking about Sinclair's possessive, overprotective inner animal who has a conniption if his scent fades from my skin or tries to bribe me with stolen children so I'll let him avenge my honor. A deep pang rises in my chest the more I linger on my mate, love and long overwhelming me all at once.

It's okay, we're going to see him again. My wolf assures me, every bit as heartsore as I am – if not more so. The sight of Sinclair's battle scarred body is fresh in my memories, and the pain I feel for the pain I love suffering thus is almost too much to bear. I'll never forgive myself if he's hurt worse than he already is because of me.

You're right. I answer with renewed determination. "Mommy's going to get us out of this." I add to Rafe, rubbing my navel.

I begin to walk along the interior walls, checking behind every painting, lifting every vase, shoving at the bookcases and tilting and tugging each and every book. I scour the space with a fine-toothed comb, feeling along the plaster and trying not to get dissuaded when I come up empty handed. Still, it's difficult not to feel a little pessimistic when everything I attempt fails.

At last I come to the fireplace, poking and prodding at the mantle, applying pressure to the heavy grey stones and lifting the grate. Nothing happens. I run my fingers along the underside of the square opening, praying that I find some sort of button or handle, but again I find nothing. Still, something is telling me to keep trying. I've been hopeful with the other objects and furniture, but now I have the surreal sense that this is right.

As a last ditch attempt, I begin fiddling with the tools situated next to the fireplace, lifting the brush, spade and tongs. Finally I attempt to lift the poker, but it won't budge. I yank at the handle, but it remains firmly in place, as if it is glued to the floor. My heart begins to race, and instead of lifting, I try to pull it from side to side. With a forceful tug, it finally deploys, shifting towards the floor with a pronounced click. There's a rumble and the scaping of rock against stone, and suddenly the back wall of the fireplace disappears.

It takes all my restraint not to jump up and down and cheer. My spirit soars, and I hurriedly flit around the room, pulling the curtains closed and unmaking the bed. I'm listening intently for the sound of anyone approaching, terrified that a guard might walk in while the passage is open, but also afraid of making more noise than I already have by closing it. I dash to the desk and frantically try to figure out what to write. The cipher Sinclair suggested isn't the problem – the question is what on earth I should say to the man who abducted me.

Eventually I settle on the following: To His Royal Highness and Her Unholy Pain in the Ass, Lydia, For what it's worth, your plan wasn't the worst idea. It was, however, an absolute miscalculation to think I would just sit here and accept my fate. Really, if you're going to kidnap someone, you honestly ought to learn a few things about them first.

Even though I may look like a helpless damsel, it's not in my nature to surrender. Please consider doing more research in advance of your next scheme, or I'm afraid you might be doomed to fail again. Losing may be what you're accustomed to, but if you just apply yourself and put in the work, you'd be amazed at what you can achieve.

And while I offer this humble advice for your diabolical schemes out of the goodness of my heart (I do worry that if you continue to be such an utter and complete failure, it might further degrade your mental health and you're already plenty psychotic), I must warn you against targeting me again. Continuing to move against Sinclair is not only dangerous, it is phenomenally stupid. Eventually he will lose his patience with humoring your pathetic schemes and fight back – and you will die an excruciating but well-deserved death.

Sincerely, Ella Sinclair P.S. Go fuck yourself.

Dropping the pen, I pause to glance at the go-bag I took to the safehouse. I don't want it to weigh me down, but I can't afford to lose the herbs Adolpho gave me. I grab the tin, leaving the rest behind, and tuck it into my pocket. I quickly return to the fireplace and

slip inside, every nerve in my body singing with excitement. We did it! This is actually going to work!

My wolf howls with delight, and I search for a way to close the passage from the inside, soon finding a similar lever as the one disguised as a poker. The stone closes behind me, and suddenly I'm in utter, complete darkness. If my wolf was fully awake, I'd probably be able to see through the pitch black tunnel, but instead I can only make out dim shadows.

Still, it's certainly better than nothing. Thanking the goddess for the first step of my escape, I pray that this passage leads me straight out of the palace and that I don't have to navigate a complicated maze of tunnels that might let me out in another room or worse... get me lost. If I want to get notice to Sinclair before he can stage a rescue, I have to be quick.

I set off at a trot before remembering I'm supposed to be on bed rest. You'll be more stressed by remaining in danger than you will by a little exercise. My wolf reasons, but I'm not sure. I slow to a quick walk, telling myself that this is better anyway in case the ground is uneven or I come across an unexpected step.

I'm relieved when the tunnel continues straight on ahead with only a few twists and turns, but no intersections with other passageways. However my relief soon turns to fear, because I walk further and further into the darkness with no end in sight. I'm not sure how much time passes, but seconds turn to minutes, and minutes turn to what feels like hours. I have no way of knowing if my mind is merely playing tricks on me, or if I really am walking as far as it feels.

The longer I walk, the more I begin to feel paranoid about my plan. What if there is no end? What if I just keep walking forever and never get out? 1

You're being irrational. My wolf answers in a soothing tone. This tunnel is here for a reason, it can't go on forever and the fact that it's so long is a good sign, there's no way we're still in the palace.

But where is it going to let out? I fret. At this rate I'll never be out in time to get in touch with Sinclair.

We'll figure it out. She replies. Don't stress more than you have to. Think of the pup.

I nod in agreement, and apologize to the tiny being inside me. "I'm sorry, Rafe. It's okay, I'm okay."

I wish I could say the tunnel ended soon, but instead it goes on for miles. I walk until my legs are weak with exhaustion, and when I finally reach the end, I'm so relieved that

tears fill my eyes. Of course, my tears transform from happy to horrified when I finally emerge from the passage.

If that tunnel was meant for evacuation, then it certainly did its job. It empties out into the frozen wilderness of the mountains outside the city, so far from civilization that I can't even see Moon Valley in the distance. It's the coldest month of the year, and the landscape is buried beneath a thick blanket of snow. I'm wearing the simple clothes the Prince provided so I could change out of the dirtied and bloodied outfit from the kidnapping: no coat, no gloves, hat or scarf.

Suddenly I'm praying that Sinclair staged his rescue earlier than planned, because if he doesn't find me soon... I'm going to die out here.

Chapter 135 – Sinclair Stages a Rescue

Sinclair

After waking from my dream with Ella, I immediately get to work trying to find a way into the Royal Palace. I'm hopeful that Ella might be able to find a way out on her own, but I'm leaving nothing to chance. I call Adolpho and my father for insights on secret passages while Hugo and Roger assemble a small army of our best fighters.

None of us have slept much since the battle, and I know this is another of Lydia's tactics. The Prince and his men will be well rested and fully energized, while mine will be running on fumes. Still, Ella and the baby are all the motivation I need to push through my exhaustion.

Adolpho tells me about a tunnel near the river which can help us breach the Palace without a loud, violent assault bound to draw attention from the public and the media alike. This is good – it was going to be hard to explain why the Moon Valley Alpha was sending forces to attack the Royal Residence, but I'd been willing to do it if there were no other options. When I share this logic with my father, he frowns thoughtfully, and I pause. "What is it?"

"Are you sure you want to keep this quiet?" He questions, rubbing his jaw." Maybe this is the opportunity we've been waiting for, to show the world Damon's true colors. No one would blame you for attacking if they knew the Prince kidnapped your mate, and after you defended the territory against the rogues so valiantly – no one would accuse you of being weak for calling him out."

I consider his words carefully. We've always kept our shadow war with the royal family secret because accusations without proof or action are more likely to backfire than make progress. However this time there's been plenty of action, and the early "all clear" along with Ella's testimony and injuries could be the proof we need.

I don't know what happened to her guards' bodies and we checked the CCTV cameras in the area of the accident only to find all the footage erased, but we might not need a smoking gun if we can get Ella back safely. 1

We will get her back safely. My wolf corrects me fiercely. And then we should kill Damon and Lydia both. Just think of the possibilities, he suggests slyly, gearing up for a bloodthirsty rant. We can tear off all his fingers and shove them up...

I tune out the violent images suddenly filling my mind. Not for the first time, I'm surprised at my wolf's willingness to harm our fated mate, but I can't help sharing his desire to exterminate the Prince. Granted, this is another idea which has historically been very tempting, but I've held back for much of the same reasons. Shaking my head, I groan, "I fucking hate politics." 1Dad's lip quirks, "Care to share your train of thought?"

“If I accuse him without doing anything about it. I’m weak. But if I kill him without authorization from the Alpha Council, then I’m an anti-government rogue – a usurper.” I explain gruffly. “Sometimes I think the old ways were better. No diplomacy, no voting – just taking the power which is rightly yours.”

My father clears his throat and arches his brows, patiently waiting for me to work through my frustration and reach the right conclusion on my own.” I know, I know!” I gripe. “That’s what they did. That’s the kind of ruler from which we’re trying to protect the united packs. But it still makes me want to rip my hair out. I hate that we have to play by the rules just to prove ourselves worthy of the position they stole through flouting them at every turn.”

“But we do, because at the end of the day our responsibility is to do right by the people, and we can’t do that if we get exiled or deposed.” Dad reasons calmly.

This reminder, more than any of the possible implications for my campaign, makes the decision for me. “And I have to do right by Ella, which I can’t do if I get distracted with the politics. The most important thing is bringing her safely home, and that means I have to go with the plan which gives us the best chance of doing that. It’s riskier to stage a full on incursion. The surest bet we have is to sneak in through the evacuation tunnels and keep a low profile.”

“Alright then,” Dad agrees with a proud twinkle in his eye, “And afterwards we can consider how to handle the Prince moving forward.”

I nod, feeling a little calmer now that we’ve rationalized our plan. I spend the rest of the day strategizing and waiting with baited breath for Ella’s call. Every time the phone rings or I get a notification my heart leaps in my chest, and every time it falls when I see that it’s just one of my men or a news blurb.

We’ve been getting non-stop requests from the media ever since the rogue attack, and even though I’m worried about the optics, so far I’ve refused to hold a press conference or make a statement. I sent Hugo to issue a press release while I focus on the rescue mission, hoping that will be enough to calm the clamoring public.

I wait until an hour before the Prince’s deadline to finally call him to set our meeting. At this point it’s been eight hours since I woke up, and I figure that if Ella hasn’t found a way out by now, she’s not going to. I use the same protocol from our first rendezvous, promising to send the location just prior.

Meanwhile I mobilize my team to the site of the tunnel entrance, and send backup squadrons to surround the palace. Nearly every enforcer I possess is ready and waiting to infiltrate the palace if the plan backfires, and I can only hope that the Prince empties

the palace of guards in order to take them to the meeting.

We see the second they move out, truckloads of shifters rolling out of the main gates and heading off in the direction of our meeting point. I don't waste any time guiding my forces into the passage, traversing the narrow space at a steady trot. It's only about a thousand meters to the tunnel entry, which lets us out into the opulent palace library through a bookcase.

I've been in this library before, and I know it's in the east wing of the estate. Luckily it's unguarded, so I move to the windows as quietly as I can, trying to gauge our exact location. I'm not going to be able to pick up Ella's scent until we're closer, the sprawling palace is simply too large.

"Okay, we've got some ground to cover, boys." I state determinedly. "Keep your eyes and ears open."

I open the door and peer outside, clearing my corners before emerging into the corridor. We stealthily sneak through the halls, peeking around corners and sneaking up on unsuspecting guards posted along the way.

For every wolf we dispatch, we try to drag their unconscious bodies out of sight to avoid detection, but the fact is that our scents are going to give us away just as quickly. When we cross the second floor atrium I finally catch Ella's scent, and then it's merely a matter of following my nose. I keep one eye on the world outside the windows as we go to ensure our path matches up with the location of the room Ella described to me.

When we finally reach the third floor corridor in question, I know we're in the right place by the guards posted at Ella's door. I deal with them quickly letting my enforcers drag their bodies into hiding while I storm inside.

The room is exactly as Ella described, and her scent is everywhere. I scan the area for her, noticing the drawn curtains and unmade bed. Worry pulses to life in the pit of my stomach... if she found a way out then why haven't I heard from her?

I catch sight of a piece of paper on the desk, covered in Ella's scrawling script. I can't help but chuckle when I read her sassy note, even though it gives me no comfort to know that she found a passage when she hasn't yet made contact. Either she ended up getting lost somehow, or she's been caught.

I pick up the note and fold it, placing it in my pocket. Ideally when the prince returns, he'll catch the scent of my team in the room and see the disabled guards in the corridors, then assume we took Ella out the same way we got in. In reality we'll be somewhere else entirely.

“All right, let’s move.” I order. It takes a minute for us to figure out how to open the passage, but once we do my team storms into the fireplace, forced to duck our heads below the low ceiling. The last man inside shuts the passage behind us, and darkness closes in. Ella’s sweet scent fills the air, in fact, she’s all I can smell for miles ahead.

Miles... I realize with a fresh stab of fear. My little troublemaker is only supposed to be on her feet for twenty minutes at a time... what if she isn’t lost or recaptured, but somewhere further down this tunnel experiencing a medical crisis... or worse?

‘We’re taking this at a run.’ I announce, my voice echoing in the dim space. ‘Try to keep up.’ With that I take off into the darkness, hoping against all hope that we aren’t too late.

Shuffle! Shuffle!

Chapter 136 – Ella's dilemma

Ella

I gaze around at the icy mountains, squinting up at the sky. The sun is high overhead, only halfway through its daily journey from East to West. That means it's about noon... three hours from when I found the passage, according to the bedroom clock. The Prince's deadline isn't until dusk, which means there's still time to get word to Sinclair, assuming I can figure out how to get back to the city.

Suddenly I'm kicking myself for leaving my go-bag behind. My coat wasn't there because it had been stained and damaged, but I had other clothes inside, things I could layer onto my body to try and provide myself some warmth. I might move faster without the weight, but lightness won't help me if I drop dead from hypothermia.

Just keep your blood moving. My wolf advises, as long as your heart is pumping it will keep you warm.

Not if I'm sweating. I counter, the liquid will just freeze and kill me faster.

Then stay active, but not so active that you're sweating. You don't want to stress the baby anyway. She advises,

Alright. I agree. How far do you think the valley is?

Well, it's nowhere in sight, so we must be on the wrong slope of the mountain. My wolf reasons, making my heart sink.

So what? I have to go over it? I ask in horror, looking up at the snow covered peak. There's no way I can make that sort of climb without gear, and it would certainly take more time than I have to spare. Besides, I'd probably fall into a crevasse or get buried in an avalanche. There is no way in hell I can survive that journey.

I think we have to give up on the idea of reaching Sinclair before he can come after us... we need him to come after us. All we can do is try to stay warm and hope he attempts a rescue sooner rather than later. She suggests.

I hate to admit it, but I know she's right. I'd wanted to prevent Sinclair from encountering any more danger than he already has, but beggars can't be choosers, and right now I'm certainly a beggar. So do I stay put and walk in circles, or try to descend? I wonder. I don't want to stay out in the open like this, in case the Prince figures out that I've escaped before Sinclair comes for me, but the closer I am to the tunnel, the faster I can be rescued.

I could just go back into the tunnel and hope that the Prince doesn't figure it out. I

realize, a light bulb bursting on in my head. It's a risk, but the tunnel had been warmer at least, surely I'd have a better chance if... My thoughts trail off as I turn and see that the rock wall where I'd emerged is tightly shut. Like the fireplace, an interior lever had opened the exit to the passage, but unlike the fireplace, this one seems to have closed behind me.

Panicked, I rush back to the granite slab, pushing at it the way I'd seen my guards to at the safe house. I try and try to open it again, looking around for anything that might trigger the internal mechanism and finding nothing. In the end I'm throwing my body into the rock, tears of frustration

streaming down my cheeks. "No!" I cry out angrily. "No, no, no! It isn't fair. Open, damn you!"

Nothing happens, and I end up collapsing into the snow with a wordless scream of outrage and misery. Get up! My wolf orders sharply, lying in the snow is going to soak your clothes and then we'll really be screwed.

Knowing she's right, I jump back onto my feet. The tears from frost on my cheeks, and I rub away the crystalline particles, trying to keep my wits about me even though I want nothing more than to rage at the Goddess and the universe for putting me in this situation.

At a loss, I stare down the mountain. The treeline starts about a mile below me, and though I know the sun will keep me warmer than the shaded forest, it's also lower elevation and I might find shelter for the night. Even as I think it, I know I won't make it through the night... not in my current state.

There are always the herbs. My wolf reminds me softly, her voice heavy with regret for making the suggestion. If you wake me fully we'll be able to handle the elements. Wolves are made for the wilderness... you'll be ten times harder to kill.

No! I argue immediately clutching my belly. Not unless we have no other choice. Those herbs are a last resort.

I don't like it any more than you do. She remarks sorrowfully, but this is life and death. If you don't make it, Rafe doesn't either.

I know that! I insist ferociously. But I can't... there's still a chance that we can find another way. Maybe Sinclair can catch up before it's too late.

Maybe there's a cabin somewhere in that forest... in fact, I bet there is! If the Royal Family uses this tunnels in emergencies I bet there's some sort of emergency shelter nearby! It would be crazy not to when things get like this in winter.

Okay, then. My wolf approves. We keep moving and we look for shelter.

Calmer now that I have a plan, I rub my belly and give a word of comfort to my growing pup. "It's okay, angel. Daddy's going to come for us, and until then I'm going to keep you safe and sound."

It takes me ages to reach the forest. I force my tired legs through the deep snow drifts, sinking down into feet of fresh powder with every step I take. I try to use my sharpened senses to detect a path or signs of opening in the dense trees, but I can't seem to decipher anything but ice and snow. I'm already exhausted, and my skin stings with the bite of the glacial wind. I experience some relief when I move into the dense woodland, scenting the air for any signs of wildlife or civilization – no matter how distant.

The snow isn't as deep in the forest, and it isn't as cold as it had been on the exposed snowpack, but it's getting harder and harder to keep moving. I want to rest so badly, but I just keep my mind on Sinclair and Rafe, and force my body to continue fighting.

I stumble forward for what seems like hours, and when night falls, I realize that it has, in fact, been far longer than I understood. I haven't found any signs of shelter, and the air around me grows more frigid as the darkness sets in. "Where are you, Dominic?" I ask aloud, my breath coming out in a white fog around my face. I try to comfort myself with the knowledge that he will certainly know I escaped by now, and he's probably on his way... but that tunnel was so long, and I've been walking for hours since.

He's not going to make it in time. I suddenly realize, with dreadful certainty. He must have waited until he couldn't any more... I begged him only to rescue me as a last resort and he listened. Now it's too far, and I'm too weak. He's still hours away, and I can barely put one foot in front of the other... I can't even feel my toes anymore.

As the horrible reality overtakes me, I give up my trek. Shivers wracking my body, I curl up on the ground, clutching my limbs in a little ball. There's only one thing left for me to do... but I can't bear the pain of knowing saving my life will mean ending my baby's.

"I'm sorry." I sob pitifully, cradling my tummy. "I'm so sorry. I don't want to do this." I tell Rafe. "I tried... I tried so hard to save us."

Though it had been her suggestion, my wolf is keeping mournfully in my head, every bit as devastated as I am. "I love you so much. If there was any other way... I would never hurt you." My breath is heaving so violently that I can no longer breathe, "You were my dream... you were everything I ever wanted... your Daddy and I were to give you such a wonderful life..." I share through hiccups. "You were never going to want for anything, or doubt how deeply we loved you for a single second. You were my entire world, and Dominic's too..." I can't bear that I'm already referring to him in past tense. "

I'm so, so sorry... you will always be my little prince. We will never forget you, Rafe."

I continue crying my eyes out until I can feel my eyelids drooping and my heart rate beginning to slow. I don't move until I know that there's no more time to waste. If I don't do this now... my baby won't be the only one who dies.

It's time. My wolf murmurs, sounding too far away for comfort.

My heart shattering into a million pieces... I swallow the herb.

Chapter 137 – The Herb

Ella

My grief keeps me awake far longer than I'm sure I could have managed otherwise. I'm alone, so I don't bother trying to quiet my keening, wailing my despair into the night air. I'm not sure how long it will take for the shift to take hold, but I pray that the violent transformation will generate enough heat and energy to allow me to survive.

The possibility that it might fail seeps into my mind and suddenly I wonder if I should have just let myself fall asleep, rather than meeting my end in agony.

Oh Goddess, I should have taken the herb hours ago. I think woefully. Now it's probably too late.

This thought only makes me cry harder, but there's also a growing kernel of warmth in my belly, pulsing inside me and radiating the strangest sensations through my body. Suddenly the entire forest explodes into a cacophony of sound – chirping crickets, croaking frogs, the low hoot of an owl, and other things I can scarcely recognize. I can hear small animals scurrying below the snowpack, and the sound of the wind rustling through the trees for miles away. It's too -overwhelming, and I'm amazed by the images that appear in my mind, explaining each sound with a clarity I couldn't have possibly imagined. It's almost as though I can see sound.. and I realize this must be how it is for wolves all the time. The herb is working.

Then I hear something else, pounding footprints crunching through the snow. "No! No, no, no." I moan desperately, my mind slowly piecing together the puzzle of information. If I hear footsteps it means... it means either Sinclair or the Prince has finally caught up with me. Either way...

I'm going to be found imminently, which means didn't have to take the herb after all. I find the strength to push my body up on my hands and knees, sticking my fingers down my throat and trying to make myself vomit.. to undo the horrible.

That's how Sinclair found me a few minutes later, sobbing and gagging, begging the Goddess to take back my rash actions. "Ella!" He shouts, racing towards me. "Oh thank the stars." His voice pierces my skull at a terrifying volume, and I clamp my hands over my ears, crying out.

"Ella, it's okay, I'm here." Sinclair assures me, misunderstanding my pain. His voice is still too loud, but the pain in my heart is even more excruciating than the pain in my head.

"No," I cry again, my chest heaving. "No, you..

You're t-too la -late."

Sinclair crashes onto his knees in the snow beside me, wearing head to toe tactical gear that no doubt kept him perfectly warm through his own alpine trek. His arms reach for me, but I jerk away from him, my adrenaline spiking again now that my baby's life is in unnecessary danger. I'm crying so hard I can't catch my breath, but I still can't make myself vomit. The surreal power swirling in my stomach only grows stronger, and I know there's no reversing this. I jerk my head to Sinclair, and he reels back when he sees my wide, glowing eyes.

"I thought... I thought I was dying" I try to explain, my words coming out babbled and slurred. "I didn't th-think... I had.. a ch-choice."

Understanding makes Sinclair's brilliant green eyes go wide with alarm and pain. He swears under his breath, looking over his shoulder at his second in command. "We need an extraction right now. Call for a chopper." I hear the man pulling out his phone and the dial tone is as loud as a blaring fog horn.

I'm shaking my head as Sinclair reaches for me again, my words unintelligible in the height of my "anguish. "It's okay, baby. It's gonna be okay."

Sinclair croons, dragging me into his embrace even though I fight tooth and nail. "Come on, let's get you warm." He unzips his coat and pulls me against his overheated body before zipping it up again.

The man on the phone is speaking now, giving our location, and I'm amazed to discover I can detect the pilot's voice just as easily. Sinclair's heart beat is pounding against my ear, and the sounds of his men's hearts and breath fill my head as well. "Too loud." I whimper, "It's too loud."

"I know, baby." Sinclair whispers, but it sounds like a yell. He chafes my body with his hands, generating heat through his thick jacket. "We don't have much time." He says then, clearly talking to his men. "She's about to enter her first shift."

"Her first -" One of the men starts to question, clearly not in on the secret of my suppressed wolf.

Sinclair cuts him off, "I'll explain later, we need to get out of the woods."

He stands, cradling me in his arms, and I sob into his neck. "Th-the p-pup." I moan. "I-I've k-killed him."

"Shh, little one." Sinclair, purrs, but I can hear the "grief in his own voice. "Let's just get you someplace safe. Fuck, you're frozen solid." He takes off at a run, and suddenly I

understand how he reached me so fast. Even carrying me on two legs, he and his men are five times as fast as a human, and probably ten times faster than I'd be stumbling and falling through the deep snow in my exhaustion.

The world starts to go fuzzy then, and I feel as though I've swallowed a glowing ball of light. Other senses are starting to sharpen – my eyes are tightly shut and blurred with tears, but my nose is suddenly every bit as overwhelmed as my ears.

Sinclair's familiar aroma has been magnified by a thousand, deepened and more complex than I've ever experienced before. It's so strong I almost feel intoxicated with it, but I can smell other things too, things I never imagined having scents – like the sweat of the men surrounding us, and my mate's fear for my well being. Bad things too, like the decay of dead animals trapped in the ice, or the scat of a lynx somewhere off in the distance.

It seems as though I've been moving through the world in a bubble my entire life, and now that protective, insulating barrier has finally popped and everything is coming into severe focus reminds me of birth, of a child existing in its dark, -fluid filled sac until it's abruptly introduced into the harsh world with no warning. I suppose this is a rebirth for me, but the comparison sends my spiraling emotions even further out of control. The cost of my own reincarnation is depriving my pup of his own life... he will never have the chance to experience life outside of my womb.

My shivers only worsen with my grief, and though Sinclair's scorching skin is buffering my icy limbs,

I can't get warm. We're out of the forest in an instant, and then a horrible, violent whump whump whump, fills my ears. I scream in response to the noise of the helicopter, more painful than anything I've yet experienced.

Sinclair attempts to help by pressing one of his hands over my own. "Just hold on, Ella." He encourages. "I've got you."

He leaps into the back of the aircraft, taking me into a far corner and strapping himself in. I'm trying to plug my ears again, but it won't work. His men clamber into the chopper with us, and then we're leaving the ground, gaining altitude and rising up into the heavens. The motion makes me feel sick to my stomach, but my body seems incapable of rejecting the contents of my stomach, as if the herb congealed my insides and formed an immovable rock to ensure the metamorphosis takes hold.

"Let me see your hands, baby." Sinclair requests, dragging one of my palms from my ears to examine my fingers. He curses again, and I realize it's because my extremities have turned blue with frostbite. He does the same with my feet, and I can't even bring myself to care that I might lose my fingers and toes. I would gladly trade them for my

baby. Sinclair tucks my frosty fingers under his arms and grips my toes in his hands, trying to radiate his own warmth into my system. "Im sorry," He murmurs as quietly as he can, his voice thick with emotion. I smell salt unlike my own tears or the others' sweat, and I realize they're Sinclair's tears. "Im sorry it took me so long to reach you."

I've been keeping my eyes tightly shut, terrified of adding more sensory stimulation to my already overloaded system, but I force myself to look up at him. It's dark in the helicopter, which is a true blessing. I can see Sinclair as clearly as I normally would have in the light, his features are strained with the weight of his guilt and sadness. I can't stand it, this isn't his fault and I know he's going to torture himself for my rash decision. "I sh-should have waited... been stronger."

Sinclair's face crumples with pain. He starts to purr then stops, remembering my sensitivity to noise. He opens his mouth to respond to my statement, but before he can get a word out something explodes inside of me, and I scream at the top of my lungs.

Sinclair grips me tighter, ordering the pilots to hurry up. "Faster! Her shift is beginning."

Chapter 138 – Ella Shifts

Sinclair

I don't remember much about my own experience shifting for the first time. I remember the blinding pain, the torment of having every bone in my body broken, every muscle torn to perform the strange alchemy of reshaping my into a wolf.

I remember it feeling as though it lasted forever, the certainty that it would never end... that I was surely dying. I didn't understand how anyone could survive such torment, but my Father was beside me every step of the way, holding me, comforting me and promising that it would be alright. I recall the rumble of his steady, reassuring voice more than anything else, but I never imagined how hard it must have been for him to watch me suffer thus.

Now I understand only too well. It's worse with Ella, because all her senses are coming in at once – the entire world suddenly becoming too sharp, too bright, too loud. And her agony is deeper, because in becoming her wolf she's also losing our baby, the baby she waited and longed for over so many years.

I'm devastated to know our son won't survive, and I can feel his immense stress through our bond as Ella's wolf emerges, but the worst part of all this is knowing I can't fix it. I can't protect either of them from the brutality of nature.

I would gladly take on Ella's pain myself. I would gladly suffer so that she doesn't have to... but I can't, I can only be there for her and try to ease her distress. When the helicopter lands on the roof of the mansion, I carry Ella down to my room, struggling to hold onto her as her small form jerks and spasms with more strength than she would ever be able to manage normally. She's still shivering with cold, and though her wolf is waking up, I'm worried that it may not be fast enough to save her fingers and toes.

"Look baby, look – it's your nest." I tell her, unwrapping her from my coat to deposit her on the bed.

Ella is still in the beginning stages of her shift, still lucid enough to know where she is and what's happening. It won't stay that way, of course. In a few hours she'll be so consumed by pain that she won't know her own name anymore.

She peeks through the darkened room, taking in her surroundings. With a pitiful moan, she weakly crawls deeper into the pillowy haven, both relieved to be in her safe haven and heartbroken to know she won't need a nest much longer. I quickly bury her trembling form in blankets, and drop a kiss to her tear-stained cheek, promising to return shortly.

I leave her only long enough to fill the bath with warm water, trying not to think about

how different this might have turned out if I hadn't waited so long to go in after her. I'd been trying to respect her wishes, to make her escape as safe as possible. Instead she ended up alone and helpless on the frozen mountain.

The sounds of Ella's inconsolable weeping and whimpers of pain provide a tortuous soundtrack to my internal diatribe, and I return to the bedroom to find her writhing in discomfort under the blankets. When I try to lift her she resists, "N-no." She cries, shoving my hands away. "I w-want to stay. If I h- have to l-lose him, it sh-should be here."

"I'll bring you back." I vow, realizing what a mistake it was to offer her this comfort and then try to take it away – even if it is only temporary. "We have to get you warm first, sweetheart."

But Ella won't have it. She fights me tooth and nail as I forcibly remove her from the bed, as vicious as a tiny hellcat despite her exhaustion and depleted state. It breaks my heart to be so ruthless with her, but I know it's for her own good. I can't get her to be still long enough to undress her so I tear her clothes away and drag her into the bath. She goes in with a great splash, then whines as the warm water meets her numb extremities, no doubt sending pins and needles through her limbs.

Ella immediately tries to escape the tub, and I hold her down, wishing there was any other way. I've called for the doctor, but until her shift is over, administering any kind of care to her is going to be harrowing.

Ella lashes at me the only way she can, telling me she hates me, that I'm a monster and she'll never forgive me for this. I know she's not herself, but I'd be lying if I said these words didn't hurt, digging into my already aching heart like so many knives.

I can't even purr for her, because the noise alone will make her pain that much worse. The sounds and chaotic scents of the city have already amplified the pain she was feeling in the forest, and I'm trying my best not to add to her plight. I wish I could get some food into her to help provide her energy for what is yet to come, but I know it will be impossible. It's probably for the best anyway, since her taste buds will be just as oversensitive as everything else.

Suddenly Ella's back bows violently as a horrible crack fills the air, and I know we're out of time. She howls with pain as she enters the second stage of her shift, and my wolf whines helplessly, rabid with the need to ease her torment. I pull her from the bath and return her to the nest, letting her feel my nearness and praying this will comfort her.

Ella's shouts of anger transform into wails and begging for me to make it stop. I can only hold and pet her, whispering sweet nothings and reminders that it's only temporary. "I know, baby. I know it hurts. I promise it will be over soon."

At some point, Ella turns her eyes to me, her pupils dilated so wide with pain that her irises are nothing more than a glowing gold ring around pitch black pools. "I don't want to be a wolf anymore." She whimpers, her fingers digging into my skin with incredible force. "Just make it stop."

"I would if I could, little one." I answer miserably. "I'm so sorry."

She turns her head away from me and seizes up as all her fingers break at once, her mouth opening in a silent wail, beyond the ability of making a sound. "Shh," I croon uselessly, "Shh, I know."

By the third hour of the shift, Ella's begging has ceased. Instead the pain wracks her body with vicious sounds of breaking bones and rending flesh, contorting her into unnatural shapes as she wavers in and out of consciousness, screaming herself hoarse when she's awake and falling limp when the darkness finally takes her again.

My father enters after one such episode, finding me cradling her sleeping, broken body. I rock her and mutter in her ear, hoping she'll be able to hear me somewhere deep down. "I love you, Ella. You are loved, so so loved."

"You need to take a break, Dominic." My father encourages gently, rolling close enough to place a firm hand on my shoulder.

"No – I can't leave her." I insist stubbornly, my wolf snarling at the very suggestion.

"Will you at least eat if I bring you something?" He requests, using his sternest "Dad" voice. "You're coming off of a battle, a kidnapping, and a rescue operation on top of everything else." When I still don't respond, my attention laser focused on my mate, he adds. "You've got to keep your strength up if you want to help Ella."

This finally makes me agree, and when he brings me a heaping plate of food a little while later I scarf it down so quickly I'm worried I've made myself sick. I didn't realize how ravenous I was until the meal was in front of me, and I immediately feel revived – physically if not emotionally.

The food gives me the endurance I need to support Ella through the rest of her shift, When it's over and Ella is finally still – a pint-sized rose gold wolf curled in the wreckage of her nest, passed out from sheer exhaustion – I stumble out of the room and into my father's arms. I collapse against him, crying harder than I can remember doing since my mother died.

He purrs and consoles me the way he did when I was a pup, and I can only blubber my thanks to him – not only for this comfort, but for his own suffering helping me through

this process when I was a boy. Ella might be my mate rather than my child, but I understand what it means now to guide someone through their first shift.

In return, Dad assures me it won't be this bad when I finally become a father. "Today you did something no parent has ever had to endure." He shares, rubbing my back. "This was so much more than just a first shift, and I've never been prouder of you, son." This only makes me weep harder, and he clucks in sympathy. "Go be with your mate, Dominic. You need the rest every bit as much as she does."

Cried out, emotionally and physically spent, I do as I'm told. Returning to the bedroom, I strip of my clothes and shift into my wolf, before jumping onto the bed and curling my big body around Ella's. The moment I close my eyes, I'm asleep.

Chapter 139 – Ella's Wolf

Ella

Everything is different the moment I open my eyes. I don't really want to wake up, to face a world without my baby in it, but my grief is momentarily dimmed by my wolf's elation to finally be free. The temptation to bury my sorrows deep down and let myself be distracted is incredibly alluring, and I throw myself into denial with full force.

I feel as though I've been asleep for days, and maybe I have, but I feel stronger and sharper than I have in my entire life. The lights are searing bright, and the city is still too loud, but it's not excruciating like it was before.

My body must have acclimated while I rested, becoming used to sensing the world around me in ultra-high definition. My limbs are delightfully sore, and I revel in the feeling of thick, downy fur covering my body. I flex my fingers and toes, experimenting with my sharp claws and running my tongue over my fangs.

Being a wolf is even better than it was in my dream, partly because I know it's real this time, but also because the world around me seems completely new. It's as if I'm doing everything for the very first time, and it's impossible not to be excited and thrilled despite the dark cloud hanging over my head.

I've been so caught up in my own head that I didn't even realize that I'm not alone until a familiar, rumbling purr sounds beside me, and then a large tongue swipes over my velvety muzzle. Good Morning Little Wolf. Sinclair's voice sounds in my mind, and I practically jump out of my skin. He chuckles and nuzzles his nose against mine, How do you feel?

I look up at the giant black wolf uncertainly, feeling guilty for my joy when... when... I can't even think it. If I acknowledge what I've lost, then I won't be able to pretend anymore. If I acknowledge it, then it becomes real, and I'm not prepared to face my sorrow. A whimper slips out of my mouth, and understanding washes over Sinclair's canine features. Listen baby, how many heartbeats do you hear?

His question is more complicated than it should be, because I feel like I can hear every heart beating in the mansion. Still, I focus my attention on this room, not yet realizing why he instructed me thus. The gentle pulse of my own heart reaches my furry ears a fraction of a second before the steady pounding of Sinclair's... and there, softer and tinier than both, is a precious thump in my womb.

Rafe? I think in amazement, certain I must be dreaming. I twist my body so I can press my nose to my belly, and I can smell him! Like a blend of Sinclair and myself, with something else all his own. I've never smelled anything so wonderful in my entire life – even Sinclair, who smells good enough to eat. Tears form in my eyes, but I'm still not convinced this is real. Am I hallucinating? Is this some sort of psychosis brought on by

the trauma of losing him.

He's okay. Sinclair's deep bass intrudes on my thoughts, overflowing with happiness. The doctor was wrong.

But how!? I think, unconsciously directing the words at my mate and stunned when I realize he can hear them. I'm not sure how I knew how to communicate this way – it was simply second nature. I was so sure – how could he have survived that?

The Goddess works in mysterious ways. Sinclair answers with a shrug, before searching my face with his glowing green eyes. Can you feel the bond?"

At first I'm afraid the answer is no, but then the pup flutters in my tummy, and a wave of contentment and relief radiates through my mind. I'm stunned to realize these emotions aren't my own, but my baby's. He's relieved that I'm happy again, that I'm no longer in pain. I suddenly understand the connection Sinclair described to me, not cohesive thoughts but bursts of emotion distinct from my own.

Even though we're feeling some of the same things, there's something about his which are uniquely his. Now that I'm aware of it, it's impossible to miss. No wonder I was able to distract myself so easily! I realize belatedly. It wasn't only my own joy I was feeling, but Rafe's too.

My eyes widen in ecstatic excitement, and all I can do is launch myself at Sinclair, wagging my tail and yipping with excitement. He's okay, he's okay! I chant blissfully, momentarily thrown off balance when Rafe sends signals of happiness up at me, responding to my enthusiasm.

I can feel him. I tell Sinclair in awe, stopped in my tracks and on the verge of tears again. I can feel you, my darling. I add to Rafe, overwhelmed when he pulses with pure love.

Sinclair offers me a wolfish grin, Done celebrating already, trouble? He teases, and then he pounces, playfully wrestling and tussling with me – until we're rolling around on the bed like a couple of care-free puppies. I can hear his laughter in my head, just as I'm sure he can hear my uproarious giggles as he pins me and tickles my feet with his tail.

I nip at his ears when he tries to nuzzle my neck, earning myself great slobbering kisses in reply. Eventually I manage to jump up, energy flowing through me, accompanied by an irresistible pull to take to the forest. Somehow I know it's night without seeing outside, and the moon is calling to me in a way I can't explain.

Let's go for a run! I suggest eagerly, my body wiggling with excitement. Can we, can we? Sinclair gazes lovingly up at me as I dance around on the bed. We can, once you've got some food in your tummy. No! I throw my head back defiantly. I want to go now.

Sinclair shook his head and rises to his feet, giving me an imperious look as he towers over me. You haven't have anything in at least 72 hours, and you've been through hell in the meantime. It hasn't been that long! The Prince fed me. I argue, thinking he's miscalculating.

You've been asleep for two days, Ella. Sinclair informs me gently, bumping my nose with his. It won't kill you to wait, the forest will still be there in an hour. When I still don't look convinced, he adds, Besides, don't you want to fix the nest so that it's ready when we get back.

For the first time I look around and realize that my shift did quite a bit of damage to my nest. My teeth and claws must have been lashing out during my transformation, because my beautiful pillows and soft blankets are shredded to bits.

I whine with sudden distress, at once beside myself to know my baby is alright, but I have no safe haven in which to grow him. Sinclair shifts back into human form, and I'm amazed by how different he looks through my wolf eyes. He's always been annoyingly good looking, but somehow he seems even more handsome than ever.

His bronze skin almost glows in the bright lights, and the rugged planes of his face and body seem sharper, more powerful now. "It's okay, sweet mate." He murmurs, stroking my cheek. "I'll have the servants bring new pillows and blankets while I fix you something. Are you craving anything in particular?"

I shake my head in denial, too preoccupied with my ruined nest to focus on anything else. In the end, the time passes in the blink of an eye, as I fuss and fret over remaking the space perfectly. Sinclair has to literally drag me away in order to convince me to eat, and only the promise of a moonlit run convinces me to walk away completely.

When we get to the forest Sinclair shifts again, and I immediately provoke him into a chase. Now that my wolf is awake, his power is starker, more visceral, and I feel it constantly. For some I supposed it might be frightening, but for me it's nothing short of thrilling.

It excites me and reassures me at once, while also tempting me to no end. I want to poke and prod at it, to see if it's really as vast as it seems. It's as if his dominance and authority is a giant red button saying "do not push" and Goddess help me, but all I want to do is push it.

I don't think I've ever been happier than I am in this moment – even though the last few days have been a nightmare. I'm finally the person I was always meant to be, I have a mate who loves me, and a baby on the way. I feel so incredibly free, and when Sinclair catches me and pins me to the ground with a sexy growl, I only feel more fulfilled.

It's time to go home, trouble. He commands huskily. But I don't want to shift back. I complain, not for the sake of challenging him anymore, but because I'm genuinely afraid of the process. Why not? Sinclair inquires, nibbling my nape.

I'm scared... it's going to hurt. I admit. No, sweetheart, not this time. From now on you'll be able to shift in only a few minutes, and the more you do it, the sooner it will be that you can change in a split second. It will hurt a little – but not like before. He explains tenderly.

I don't know how to do it. I object then, purely making excuses. Well that's too bad. Sinclair replies, giving me a sly look as he feigns nonchalance. Because I can't claim you until you shift back, i

Claim me? I respond curiously, my wolf perking up with sensual interest. That's right. He confirms, a flash of fire in his sultry gaze. Unless you no longer want my mark?

No! I correct him, embarrassingly quickly. I want it. Then shift, mate. He orders again. And I'll give it to you.

Chapter 140 – Foreplay

Ella

“This isn’t fair.” I complain, sitting naked in the back of the limo, glaring at Sinclair. “You said you would claim me if I shifted.” “Greedy mate.” He teases, kissing the soft spot behind my ear. “I didn’t say I would do it in the middle of the forest.”

He hadn’t, but I was still very displeased when – instead of ravishing me the moment I finished the painful but brief shift back into being a human – he pulled me to my feet and strolled back to the waiting cars and guards. “I don’t see why not.” I grumble, “I like the forest.”

“Because we’d be too exposed in the forest, I wouldn’t be able to really enjoy myself because I’d be too on my guard.” He answers in a low rumble. “And it’s our first real time together, I’m not going to make love to you up against a tree.”

“Then how are you going to do it?” I ask, peeking up at him and discovering his eyes already glue to my sulking features. “In the back of a limo, maybe?” I suggest, stroking his muscular thigh and batting my lashes.

“No, you naughty thing.” He chuckles, pulling me a little closer, even though we’re already flush. He pauses to claim my lips, then trails kisses over my jaw until his warm breath is fluttering over my ear. “I’m going to take you home and lay you out on my bed–”

“My nest.” I correct him, not caring for this mischaracterization.

Sinclair emits a wordless rumble, heavy with amusement. “Fine then. In your nest. I’ll lay you out like my own personal feast, and then I’m going to kiss every last inch of your lovely body before I even consider touching your sweet pussy.” He declares, his deep voice turning my entire body into liquid fire.

“And when you’re so desperate and needy that you’re all but begging for relief, I’m going to make a home between your legs and absolutely gorge myself on your honey. I’m going to make you come so many times that you think you can’t take any more pleasure... and then I’m going to prove you wrong.”

His big hands trail over my naked body as he speaks, stroking and caressing me with such intense focus that I feel like I’m the only thing in the world... in his world. Suddenly I understand why he hadn’t wanted to do this in the forest, where he has to worry about safety or privacy, where he can’t disappear into the moment. “And every time you beg me to go faster, I’m just going to go slower.”

He continues darkly, sending delicious shivers down my spine. No one has ever spoken

to me this way, and there's something about it that feels so forbidden that I can't help but feel even more turned on. "And when I finally drive my cock into you, and stretch your tight little sex until you're full to bursting, I'll let my wolf take over."

Oh Goddess, I think, my body flushed and smoldering simply from listening to him speak. Is it possible to climax from words alone?

"I'm going to take you so fiercely, so ruthlessly, that your own wolf is going to come to absolute pieces." Sinclair states huskily. "I'm going to possess you so completely that you won't even feel whole again unless I'm inside you." I shudder and he purrs, cupping my breast and brushing his thumb over my beaded nipple.

"That's right, gorgeous. I'm going to make you crave me as wildly as I crave you, and only when I've brought you to another climax on my cock, when I've gotten so lost in your beautiful body that I won't be able to hold back any longer – will I claim you."

Sinclair drops his head to the spot where my neck meets my shoulder, grazing his teeth over my sensitive skin. He closes his fangs over my flesh, applying gentle pressure, and my wolf begins howling with need. How can a man touching such an innocent spot cause so much pleasure? So much desire?

I whine aloud when he releases me, and an amused rumble accompanies his next words. "I'll bring you back to the edge and sink my fangs deep. I'll claim you as my one and only mate for the rest of our lives... the force of the bond will scare you, but you won't have to worry because I'll be right there, holding you tight."

He promises, filling me with an entirely different kind of warmth. "It will send us both into the fucking stratosphere, and when it's over we'll sleep for a while, but then we're going to wake up and do it over, and over, and over again."

I'm nothing more than a puddle in his arms at this point, and the smug Alpha knows it. When I look up at him his wolf is glowing in his eyes, and even though he's turned my brain to mush, I can't help but notice that I'm not the only one who's gotten excited by his dirty talk.

He's as naked as I am, and I have to fight not to gape at the size of him. Surely he hadn't been that big in our dream? Either way my wolf is preening with the pride of knowing his desire is for me and me alone. I have the strongest impulse to reach out and take his hardness in my hand, and my mouth positively waters. "And will I finally be allowed to... to touch you?" I inquire shyly, not brave enough to use the same blunt terms he does.

"If you ask very nicely, and you tell me exactly what you want to do." He replies, pressing his mouth to mine and nipping my plump lower lip.

My heart skips a beat as I realize he wants me to speak as he is, to be explicit about my desire and shrug off my inhibitions. I want so badly to give him pleasure, especially after all these weeks of receiving his selfless affection and not being able to return it. Still, I've never spoken about sex this way – even with Mike.

At best he would ask if I was in the mood, then lie on top of me for a few minutes before groaning out his release and patting my bottom to reward me for a job well done. In hindsight I hate that I was such a doormat with him, but I didn't know what sex could be like until I met Sinclair.

The car pulls to a stop in front of the house before I can conjure a reply, and Sinclair wraps me up in a robe before donning one himself, and carrying me inside. He bounds up the stairs to his bedroom, then sweeps into the bathroom and sets me on the ground. "Bath or shower?" He asks, pulling off my robe.

"What? But I thought..." I stammer, thinking of his promises in the car. "Are you so eager to get your nest dirty?" Sinclair inquires, quirking his lip and gesturing to the conifer needles and streaks of mud on our legs. I forgot we'd been romping through the forest as our wolves, and even the snow couldn't keep the dirt away entirely.

"No!" I immediately object, despising the very idea. I try to focus on his first question, but the thought of a bath raises images in my mind, fuzzy memories of being held down as Sinclair tried to warm my frostbitten fingers and toes.

"Dominic," I murmur, for the first time coming out of the joyful haze that has consumed me since realizing my baby survived the shift. I'm quickly recalling everything my mate did for me in the last few days and worse, I remember the horrible things I said to him in that episode, and horror washes over me. "I'm so sorry for the things I said when you were trying to help me, I didn't mean them, I—"

"Later." Dominic presses a finger to my lips, stroking my hip with his free hand. "We have all the time in the world to talk about it, Ella. And that's the last thing I want to do right now."

I nod, gulping down my welling emotions. "Shower." I decide, more determined than ever to show my mate the same generosity he showed me.

We wash ourselves quickly, or perhaps I should say we wash each other quickly. Sinclair insisted on cleaning me himself, and it's no surprise when his attention gets sidetracked, his powerful hands taking detours to my breasts and between my legs as he extracts fevered kisses from my lips.

I eagerly do the same to him, and he kneels in front of me, kissing my belly and breasts

as I try to clean his shoulders, face and hair. Of course, when I try to pull the same trick he did and reach for his hardness, he catches my wrist. "Ask me, baby." He rumbles sensuously.

My eyes widen with alarm, and my cheeks flush with color. I can't! I can't talk about these things the way he does... Can I?

Chapter 141 – Ella Learns to Talk Dirty

Ella

Sinclair is towering over me, his wolf eyes glowing as he watches me work through my feelings. I gnaw on my lower lip as I try to find the bravery to ask him for what I want, and he purrs deep in his chest, cupping my cheek and tugging my lip free of my sharp little teeth. He doesn't rush me, doesn't make demands, he simply lets me process the dilemma and keeps me from breaking my skin with my new fangs. His gentle affection gives the confidence I need, and I shift a bit closer, craving his steady strength.

"Can I please touch you?" I inquire shakily, peeking up at him from beneath my lashes.

"Touch me where?" Sinclair replies, his deep bass vibrating through my overheated body as his lip quirks up.

I feel as though I've been doused in boiling water, and I'm sure he knows it. "Here." I say, gesturing to the huge hard member between his legs.

"Uh-uh trouble, if you want to do it, you've got to give me the words." Sinclair replies, stroking my spine with his free hand. "It's just you and me, angel. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Please, Dominic." I try again, licking my lips, "Can I touch... your C-cock."

Part of me wishes the floor would open up and Swallow me whole, but the member in question pulses as the word leaves my tongue, and I'm amazed to realize that I have such a powerful effect on this man. He holds the entire world in his palm, but one word from me and his body responds..

"See now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Sinclair purrs, gazing down at me with such pure adoration that I forget my embarrassment. "Of course you can touch me, Ella."

I start slowly, tracing my fingers over his thick length and running my thumb over the purple head, curiously exploring the sinewy contours and feeling bolder by the minute. I can feel the muscles in Sinclair's chest and shoulders tense in response to my ministrations, but he doesn't say a word. When I look up I discover that his eyes are on my face rather than my hand, and when I close my fist around him he has to smother a satisfied groan. I pump my hand up and down the considerable length, loving the way his hands tighten on my body in response. Sinclair hisses in a breath of air, dropping his head to the curve of my neck and kissing my throat, breathing in my scent. "Goddess, I love you." He mutters, his wolf making the most delightful grumbly sounds of contentment and desire. "My mate, all mine."

I gingerly drop to my knees, and I'm genuinely shocked when Sinclair goes from tender

affection to sudden foreboding. He tangles his huge hand in my hair, pulling my head back, "And just what do you think you're doing?" He demands ominously, his dominance rolling off of his massive form in powerful waves.

"I-I was going to use my mouth." I murmur, suddenly feeling unsure of myself.

"I don't recall you asking permission." He answers, arching a skeptical brow.

My wolf quivers and roils at once, and I notch my chin up defiantly, "Can I use my mouth?" I say, but my tone is less of a question and more of a challenge.

Sinclair's eyes flash dangerously and he shakes his head, calling my bluff. "Use it how? Do you want to kiss it?"

A wave of pure Alpha power has me shuddering with submissive instinct, and I know exactly what he wants to hear me say. If I wasn't so drunk on passion I might not be brave enough to manage it, but I'm beyond the point of no return now. "Please Dominic," I gasp deliriously. "I want to suck your cock."

He nods in approval, guiding my lips to the flared tip of his manhood. "Go on then, beautiful." As I swipe my tongue over a bead of moisture emerging from his slit, I revel in the way I'm able to enjoy being complimented. For so long, comments about my looks only brought my trauma to the surface, but I feel so safe with Sinclair that I'm able to enjoy being admired the first time in my life.

After lapping my way along his length, I close my lips around the head of Sinclair's huge cock, sucking in my cheeks and pulling him into my mouth. Sinclair hisses with obvious pleasure, and I feel so utterly powerful. It's one thing when such formidable being chooses to get down on his knees for you, and another entirely to bring him there through your own vigor – to make him lose control with a simple touch.

I slide my lips and tongue up and down his shaft, using every bit of skill I possess to pleasure him.

Maybe it's strange to be so turned on by an act that doesn't offer me any physical satisfaction, but I love seeing how I affect Sinclair. His grip tightens on my hair, and I lift my eyes to his, letting his gaze bore into me as I work my mouth over him.

"Touch yourself, Ella." Sinclair commands, his voice hoarse with barely restrained lust. "Spread that sweet pussy so I can see how wet you are for me"

I freeze, thrown off balance by the idea of pleasuring myself in front of him. At the same time, my wolf urges me to be brave. It's what he wants, he's going to like it even if you're nervous.

Sensing my unease, Sinclair gives me a low purr of encouragement, and I slowly move my hand to my swollen sex, unsure of whether or not I can go through with this. I've never touched myself in front of anyone, and part of me is surprised Sinclair would ask for this. When I finally make contact, carefully parting my nether lips for him, he speaks as though he's read my mind.

"That's it, baby." He groans, his hips twitching with the effort of holding himself back. "This is the only time you get to do this. Your pleasure is my responsibility, so from now on I expect you to tell me if you need affection. But damned if I don't love seeing you make yourself feel good."

I quiver and suck him harder, emboldened enough to play with my sensitive clit. I whimper around Sinclair's hardness, and he pulses against my tongue, clearly enjoying the vibrations. He's thrusting into my mouth now, beyond the point holding back, so I increase my pace, intent on bringing him off.

Sinclair has both hands buried in my hair now, and my excitement only increases. I forget my doubts, pleasuring myself the way I would if I were alone while he thrusts into my mouth. I reach up to grip the base of his cock, squeezing tightly because I know it's beyond the capacity of my small mouth. I work my tongue over the underside of his length, rocking into my hand as I try to focus on satisfying my mate over my own release.

After a few minutes Sinclair tenses and swears, "Fuck, stop or I'm going to come." He attempts to pull himself free of my lips, but his admission only drives me to work harder, and I cease touching myself to focus all my energy on him. I surge forward, taking him into my throat and cupping his heavy balls, rotating them between my fingers.

Sinclair curses again, fisting his hand in my hair as he explodes with a guttural growl. I swallow him down, determined not to let him down, and Sinclair shakes his head. "Are you trying to kill me, woman?" He inquires, pulling me to my feet.

I grin up at him. "I owed you." I state smugly, more "That's for me to decide." Sinclair answers darkly, cuddling me to his chest. "Naughty mate."

"It was only fair." I tell him, snuggling in. "You've been taking care of me all this time and getting nothing in return."

"Well you know what you've just done, don't you?"

Sinclair inquires mischievously, caressing my waist as he nibbles my shoulder.

"What?" I ask, still flushed and squirming with my own need. Tomorrow I might be

embarrassed about all the things I've said and done, but right now my inhibitions are gone. As far as I'm concerned, we are the only people in the world, and nothing else matter.

"You just made it possible for me to last quite some time before I come again." He replies, "And that means I can completely devote myself to you without worrying about my wolf losing control."

A wave of anticipation and trepidation wash me. I was already overwhelmed by Sinclair's plans for the night, but now it sounds as though he's even more determined to make my claiming as overwhelming as possible. I'm excited beyond belief, but I'm also anxious about whether I cope with his fierce passion.

Sinclair is watching me again, a wolfish grin stretching over his features, "What's wrong, little mate- you look nervous."

I gulp in a deep breath, trying to appear tougher than I feel. "Well that's where you're wrong. If anything I'm wondering what's taking you so long?"

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I want to take them back. In an instant I have a huge Alpha looming over me, and I've just questioned his devotion and virility, which is nothing short of a recipe for disaster.

Whoops.

Chapter 142 – Claimed

Ella

At first I think Sinclair is angry, but then his lips part in a lethal grin and a growling laugh vibrates in his chest. He slides his hand over my cheek and around my nape, tangling his fingers in my wet hair. “Do you know what it means, to top from the bottom, little wolf?” He inquires ominously, his thumb massaging my neck in steady circles.

“No.” I reply, shifting nervously from foot to foot. His demeanor is so predatory, so foreboding, and I know I’ve miscalculated in my attempt to hurry him up.

“It’s when you try to get your own way by provoking or manipulating me, using reverse psychology.” He explains darkly, “It’s an attempt to take control from your Alpha, your mate, without them realizing you’re doing it.” Sinclair prowls forward, and I instinctively retreat, moving backwards until my back collides with the tile wall.

My heart hammers in my chest, and Sinclair rumbles with satisfaction as he watches me try to cope with his dominance. “I was willing to let you get away with making me come too soon because I know how hard it’s been on your generous heart to always be on the receiving end in the bedroom, but your mischievous wolf needs to know she can’t trick me into doing things her way.”

“And h-how are you going to teach her?” I ask nervously, a shiver racing down my spine when his green eyes flash with some unnamed emotion.

“Well, I was planning on taking things slowly but making it as fun for you as possible.” Sinclair shares, sliding his knee between my thighs. “Now I think I might just drag it out, make you work for your pleasure. What do you think about that?”

I’m tempted to roll over and simply accept my defeat, but my traitorous wolf rankles at his suggestion, I can feel her rising up inside of me, and I revel over how different it is to exist in this body now that I’m sharing it with a full-fledged wolf.

In the past my inner voice has been a comfort or friend, and more recently a conundrum, now I feel like she’s at the wheel and I’m merely along for the ride. “I think that’s a terrible idea.” I hear myself reply, my voice decidedly sullen. “I shouldn’t have to wait at all when I’ve already been without your mark for so long.”

Sinclair chuckles, reaching behind his body to shut off the shower tap. He sweeps my feet off the ground, carrying me out of the shower and not bothering to dry me off before unceremoniously tossing me into my nest. I hiss and bare my fangs at him for the offense, but all this does is cause Sinclair to roll me over and pepper my bottom with swift spansks, holding me in place with a hand on the small of my back. I howl and protest, but he doesn’t listen.

Despite myself, I can feel heat pooling between my legs, and there's something so satisfying about feeling Sinclair take me in hand this way. I blame my wolf – the ridiculous creature loves his dominance in a way I don't quite understand, but she and I are one now. I find my hand trying to sneak down between my legs as he punishes me a jolt of utter rapture pulsing through me when my fingers connect with my clit.

Realizing what I'm doing, Sinclair flips me onto my back. "I thought I told you that your pleasure belongs to me, mate." He rumbles, seizing my hand and sliding my fingers into his mouth, licking the wetness from my skin. "I see I'm going to have to take things up a notch." Sinclair pins my hands on either side of my head, "Tell me now, baby. Will you be okay if I restrain you?"

Unlike before, his phrasing doesn't trigger my past. Instead it sends my foolish wolf into a fresh fit of rebellion. "I'd like to see you try." I challenge, wriggling against his hold.

Before I know it, my wrists and ankles are cinched to the four corners of the bed, and I'm spread-eagle on the mattress, immobile and completely vulnerable. For a second I start to panic, but the moment Sinclair hears my heart rate increase, he rests his palm on my belly and leans over me so I can see his face. "You're okay, trouble. I'm right here. I've got you."

My wolf settles, knowing she's safe in her mate's hands, and I submit myself to Sinclair's retribution. "So lovely." He observes, petting my swollen sex. "So slick and sensitive." His thumb works tight circles on my clit as he leans down to tease my nipple with his tongue, and I lift my hips to meet his touch, biting back my needy moan.

I'm already so turned on from the shower and his spanking, so it doesn't take long before I'm teetering on the edge of an orgasm. Unfortunately Sinclair is so tuned in to my body's cues that he senses my imminent peak, and pulls back at the last moment.

I cry out in frustration when his stimulation disappears, whining into the air and glaring at my mate. I know he's planning on doing the same thing over and over again, but this knowledge only makes me more defiant. Sinclair lowers his lips to mine, stealing a kiss as he croons, "Such a fierce little wolf."

I nip his lower lip, hard enough to draw blood, and he swats my neglected cleft, obviously not the least bit concerned with the crimson liquid pooling at the corner of his mouth.

Over the next hour, he manages to repeat the same tortuous pattern over and over again. Using his hands and mouth he brings me to the very edge of ecstasy before pulling back at the last second, leaving me disappointed and desperate. I arch into his touch wherever it's offered, eventually begging him for the release he withholds. Still he

doesn't give in, continuing his relentless pleasure campaign until I have no more defiance to wield against him.

Only when my eyes are full of tears and my vicious snarls have turned to whimpering moans does he untie my hands and feet from the bed. He rolls onto his back and encourages me to sit astride him. Finally free to climb atop him and seek my own pleasure, I balk at Sinclair's massive size.

I'm not sure if I can take him all, but Sinclair sits up, cupping my face in his hands and stealing breathless kisses from my lips. "You're in control, baby just this first time." He intimates gruffly.

But I only have so much control. If you don't act soon, I'm going to take you whether you're ready or Being ready isn't the problem, I think wryly. I'm so ready I could scream. The true issue is whether I can handle such a man, but I suppose the only option I have is to try. I carefully center the flared head of Sinclair's cock at my entrance, certain that I'm going to come to pieces the moment he's inside me.

It doesn't actually happen that quickly, because it's no easy feat cramming his girthy length into my tight tunnel. Still, as soon as my hips settle against his, Sinclair rocks up into my heat, rubbing his cock head against that special spot inside me and setting off fireworks in my body. All of a sudden the last hour of stimulation crashes over me in a stunning haze of lust and I detonate around him.

"That's it." Sinclair encourages, beyond caring about anything other than our mutual release. "

Such a good girl, coming all over my cock." I toss my head back and cry out as he lifts my hips and begins thrusting into me at a relentless pace, even though I'm the one on top. It doesn't take much to send me over the edge again, and Sinclair's deep voice and dirty words only egg me on.

"Fuck, you're so tight, baby." He purrs. "I could stay here forever. Night and day." Sinclair kisses his way down my neck, and all I can do is hang on for dear life. "Perfect, just like that, gorgeous."

I lose track of how many times I climax, but Sinclair has certainly broken his own record. At what feels like the end of an eternity, he grazes his fang over the spot where my neck meets my shoulder and sinks them in deep. I scream as a bright, white light takes over my vision, blinding me figuratively and literally. Love, fate and pure magic intertwine, consuming us both as our bond cements. Before I can think better of it, I sink my own fangs into the muscles of Sinclair's pec, staking my own claim as surely as he's staked his own.

In the delirious aftermath, I can only float in Sinclair's protective embrace, finally feeling complete after so many years of searching. All in all, this feels like a new beginning for us, and even if it isn't, surely becoming mates in every sense of the word gives us a connection that can never be broken. We're a true team now, and that has to be an advantage in the upcoming campaign.. right?

Chapter 143 – Lydia’s Revelation

3rd Person

There was a time when Lydia had dreamed about witnessing a Prince’s temper tantrum – mostly because she always imagined it would be her son, and she would have been so thrilled to be a mother and queen that she wouldn’t have cared about a childish outburst. Seeing a fully grown man, an Alpha she was hoping to seduce, rant and rave was a different thing entirely. Prince Damon had arrived back from the failed meeting with Sinclair to discover that Ella was long gone, and promptly torn her bedroom to shreds in the heat of his anger.

Walls punched, curtains torn, furniture toppled and broken – at this point it looked like a tornado had swept through the room, and Lydia was both disgusted and alarmed.

She wasn’t sure whether she should make her presence known or not. The guards had fetched her after they returned and filled her in on the situation, but Damon’s destructive fury worried her. Ella’s warnings about the man abusing his mate rung in her ears, and right now she had no trouble believing it. Lydia was furious with herself for not noticing the small army infiltrating the palace, but she’d been preoccupied trying to plan a romantic dinner for the Prince once the ransom was completed. In her mind Damon would have returned to the palace to retrieve Ella once Sinclair agreed to surrender, completed the trade and come home to celebrate with her. However now she was more worried that the Prince would blame her for concocting the plan and missing the invasion.

Lydia tried to make herself as small as possible, hovering just inside the doorway and praying to become invisible. He wouldn’t kill her.. would he?

The way he was shouting and cursing sounded much like an overwrought toddler, but this man was twice her size and could easily snap her like a twig if he wanted to. What have I gotten myself into? She thought anxiously, true doubt assailing her for the first time.

Right on cue, the Prince whirled around and saw Lydia, cowering with her arms wrapped around her slender body. Her body language reminded him so much of his late wife that a fresh wave of Wrath slammed into him. He didn’t need to be reminded that his mate had been taken from him, especially not by this schemer. “You!” He seethed, jabbing an accusatory finger in Lydia’s direction, this is all your fault! Where the hell were you!”

Her eyes widened, “I-” Before Lydia could say another word, the Prince crossed the room and slammed her back against the wall, wrapping his powerful fist around her throat.

“Shut the hell up.” He ordered ferociously. “You stupid bitch, you come here bragging

about being able to help me because you know Sinclair so well, but your plans have done nothing but backfire! I told you he wouldn't give up his campaign that easily! I told you he would stage rescue!"

Lydia wanted to snap back at him, to tell him he never would have even had the opportunity to kidnap Ella if it wasn't for her. After all, his rogue attack had failed miserably, and she'd been able to tell him exactly how Sinclair's emergency protocols worked. She was the reason he was getting so much sympathy in the press, the reason his ratings were so high. But she couldn't say any of this, because he was still shouting at her, his claws digging into her throat.

"You've been a pain in my ass since the moment you arrived!" He related, "Honestly, you have some nerve – waltzing in here as if you aren't just the barren reject of a lesser man."

Lydia's jaw dropped, and despite the fact that she could barely breathe, she argued, "How dare you – that isn't true!"

"Oh give it up!" The Prince countered, a sadistic glint in his eye. He'd always preferred to inflict physical pain, but there was no denying how pleasurable it could be to destroy a woman emotionally. "I called your husband, you know. I wanted to rub it in his face that you'd transferred your allegiance to me and you know what he told me? He told me that you came slinking onto his doorstep after you left Sinclair, promising to give him a whole litter of pups and bragging about all your experience as a Luna. And when he realized you were just a lazy gold digger who couldn't conceive an original thought – much less a baby, he kicked you to the curb." Damon informed her maliciously.

"You didn't come back because Sinclair upgraded a younger, prettier she-wolf, you did it because you had nowhere else to go." Tears burned in Lydia's eyes as the cruel man taunted her with her worst failures, but this only seemed to egg Damon on. "And I let you stay because I thought, I thought, your knowledge of Sinclair could still hold some value for me, but it turns out you're as useless a strategist as you were a mate."

His grip on her throat was getting tighter now, and Lydia dug her fingers into his hand, trying to pry it away so she'd have the space to breathe. "Please."

She begged. "I- I can still help you."

"I don't see how." The Prince scoffed, "if anything you being close to me is weakening public sympathy for me." He paused, a dawning light overtaking his features as Ella and Sinclair's clues about Angeline's murder swirled through his mind. "Why is it that you waited until my campaign was already on the upswing to offer your assistance anyway?"

Lydia's already pounding heart sped up as she realized Damon was starting to suspect

her true ambitions to replace his queen, and the crimes she'd committed in order to make it happen. She knew she had to think quickly, and her mind raced through possible distractions. Like the Prince, there were details hovering at the edge of her consciousness, just out of reach. She knew she had the key to her own survival within reach, she just had to pull the puzzle pieces together. The longer she stayed silent, the angrier the Prince became, but she could risk saying the wrong thing when he was already determined to hurt her.

The Prince's threatening growls were growing louder and louder, and Lydia felt his claws break the skin of her neck. Hot, thick blood trickled down her clavicle, and she fought back a whimper instinctively knowing he would enjoy the sound.

At the very last moment an idea clicked into place, and Lydia's panicked body relaxed with a sudden confidence that absolutely rankled the seething Prince. Fortunately for Lydia, she forced the words out before he could act on his feelings.

"I've got a better question for you." She gasped hoarsely, "Why is it that no one had ever heard of Ella until after she was already pregnant with Sinclair's child? He's the most famous man in the territory and the tabloids follow him constantly, but no one ever heard a single word about him dating someone new. And if Ella is supposed to be a cousin of Aileen Crentin's, why did I never meet her? I was at Aileen and Hugo's wedding, and I can tell you right now that Ella wasn't." She hurriedly explained.

"You think they're lying about their relationship?"

The Prince blinked, processing this idea. He only gives it a moment of thought before shaking his head. "They said she hadn't known about her relatives here until recently, besides I've never seen a pair of mates more in love."

"Then why hasn't he claimed her?" Lydia hissed, something in her gut telling her she was on the right track. "Don't you find it suspicious that they can't keep their hands off each other in public but he's letting her run around unmarked? The most possessive, dominant wolf in the world"

Prince Damon's grip loosened slightly, and he rumbled pensively, "So what, you think he hired her? That it's all been a show for the campaign?"

"Maybe." Lydia shrugged. "You have to admit it makes sense, things start going bad for him and all of a sudden he conjures a breeding mate out of the air? It's more than a little suspicious."

"You have a point." The Prince nods, his wolf flashing in his eyes. "Maybe it's time to call in Roger again."

“Roger?” Lydia scoffed, unaware of just how much Sinclair’s relationship had changed with his brother in recent months. “I’ve got news for you, Roger is the absolute last person who Dominic would confide in about his relationship – or politics.”

“Then who am I supposed to ask? His men are too loyal to be bribed and the Goddess knows his security is too tight at the mansion to get a bug in.”

The Prince questioned in frustration.

“If Ella is who she says she is then she’ll have connections in the Shadow pack, even commoners have work histories and educations, I think need to verify hers.” Lydia mused aloud, so utterly relieved to have successfully turned her assailant’s attention to the other woman.

“You’d better be right about this.” The Prince snarled, abruptly releasing Lydia’s neck. The she-wolf crumpled, trying to steady herself against the wall as her legs gave out. “This is your last chance, Lydia. One more slip up, and I’ll kill you where you stand.”

Rubbing her neck, Lydia tried to hide her trembling. “I believe you.”

Chapter 144 – Ella Begs for Mercy

Ella

When I wake, my body is filled with the most exquisite soreness. My hand immediately leaps to my neck, where Sinclair's mark is seared into my skin. Being claimed was the most intense experience of my life, and it feels remarkably as though Sinclair and

I are no longer separate people, but two halves of the same whole. His big body is wrapped around me as he dozes, and I'm amazed to realize I can sense his inner Wolf's pride and satisfaction even while he rests.

I can't really explain how the bond feels. In some way it's like my bond with the baby, except instead of flashes of hazy emotion I can constantly sense Sinclair's feelings, in a deep form of empathy that is confusing and overwhelming at times.

Our hearts beat in perfect sync now, and I know we can communicate telepathically when we choose, even though we haven't had the chance to test this particular gift. So far we haven't done anything but make love. In fact my new mate woke me up three times during the night to take me again, and my poor sex is so swollen and sensitive that I'm afraid of Sinclair waking up and lavishing more attention on my exhausted body.

I try to sneak out of bed while he sleeps, but his powerful arms tighten around me, and then there's a low rumble in my ear. "And just where do you think you're going?"

"Just to the bathroom." I lie, realizing at once that this is a mistake. If I can sense Sinclair's feelings then he can certainly sense mine.

"Tsk, tsk," He clucks, rolling me onto my back and looming above me. His voice is stern but there's only love, amusement and desire in his eyes. As soon as I see these emotions, I feel them as well, blended with my own and yet entirely distinct.

Lying to your new mate already, trouble?" Sinclair teases, caressing my cheek. "And trying to sneak away from me?" "I thought you'd try to be intimate if I woke you." I explain, only slightly sulky.

"Be intimate?" Sinclair repeats, a devilish glint in his emerald eyes. "You mean you thought I'd try to rut your sweet pussy again." I blush and shiver, certain I'll never get used to hearing him speak this way. It scandalizes me and turns me on all at once, and I know that's why he does it. If only I could hide my reaction from him – but that's more impossible than ever now. "Well was I wrong?" I demand indignantly. "I'm too sore to take any more of your wolf's affection, Dominic."

Sinclair's brow furrows and he sits up completely, "Baby, why didn't you say so?" He moves between my legs and gently rumbles when I try to clench them shut. "Come on,

let me see, sweetheart.”

I don't trust the sly wolf's intentions, and when I try to sense his emotions through our bond in order to decipher whether or not this is a trick or genuine concern, I realize I can't. “How are you doing that?” I inquire curiously, more than a little intrigued to realize there might be a way to shield my feelings from my mate.

“You can learn to withhold some things from your mate, but it takes practice.” Sinclair answers huskily, prying apart my thighs with no trouble at all. “Though I'm not sure I want to tell you how.” He adds wryly.

I clamp my hand over my center, my suspicions raised. “And why are you hiding your feelings from me now?” I inquire, now convinced this is all just a scheme.

A rush of worry assails me, and I relax slightly. “It's an old habit.” Sinclair shares reluctantly, “It's not in my nature to let others feel my anxiety, especially not my mate.” He tenderly pulls my hand away so he can examine my abused flesh, purring sympathetically and crooning when he sees how red and swollen I am. “Poor little wolf.”

He murmurs, carefully spreading my lips so he can take a closer look, “I've been too rough with you, haven't I?”

No! My wolf exclaims, and Sinclair's masculine smirk tells me I've just managed to successfully communicate telepathically. I roll my eyes at the silly canine, who loves his dominance too much to risk him going easy on us. So I sassily add, This is just what happens when you try to shove a battering ram into a keyhole.

Sinclair chuckles, his hot breath fluttering over my exposed skin. Poor, mistreated mate. His voice sounds in my head, cursed with an Alpha too well endowed for your little body to take. Amusement is heavy in his voice, and he arches a brow at me as he continues. Though I didn't hear you complaining when you were coming all over me last night.

I giggle despite myself, because he's right and both know it. I love how small and delicate I feel beside Sinclair, even if those values are misplaced by the human society that raised me, and I've certainly enjoyed myself with him in bed. My thoughts are interrupted when Sinclair moves his mouth dangerously close to my body. Here angel, let me kiss it better. Alarms go off in my brain, but then it's too late.

Sinclair's talented tongue swipes up the length of my sex, lapping up the wetness accumulated at my entrance and flicking over the tiny bundle of nerves at the apex of my mound. “Dominic no- ohhh.” I exclaim, sighing as a fresh wave of heat consumes me.

A moment ago I thought my clit might fall off if Sinclair touched it, but the pain he invokes is edged with a deep pleasure I don't understand. I abruptly realize that the worry he'd

shared with me is long gone, replaced only with cunning and triumph.

With his mouth occupied, my mate continues using our mind link. The sound of his dark laughter fills my head, soon followed by the words, I wasn't lying about sharing my worries, but perhaps I left out the fact that you can also learn to project things that aren't there, or only reveal some feelings while keeping others hidden.

I'm panting as he continues lavishing affection over my sex, my fingers tangled in his hair as confused, needy whimpers are dragged from my lips. Still, his words manage to penetrate the haze of lust and disorientation consuming my mind, and I feel a burst of relief. I'm immensely glad to know that I'll still be able to surprise and trick my mate, just as he's done to me now.

Another rumbling laugh sounds in my thoughts, You've got a long way to go before you'll be able to pull one over on me, mate. But I'd be lying if I said I'm not excited to see you try.

You just want an excuse to spank me again. I answer, trying and failing to sound offended by the idea. Sinclair pauses his ministrations to look up at me, his eyes glinting with lethal hunger. Damned straight.

When Sinclair is finished having his wicked way with me, I leap out of bed and pull on my robe, putting as much distance between myself and the bed as possible. Sinclair blinks, realizing I'm no longer sprawled like a ragdoll over his chest, before narrowing his eyes at me, "I don't recall giving you permission to leave my arms, little one."

"You stay away from me." I order, pointing at him and trying to sound firm. "My body is off limits until it's had a chance to recover, is that clear?"

Sinclair smirks, and I realize I've essentially managed to challenge him. He rises from the bed and begins prowling towards me. "Is that so?"

"Dominic, I'm serious." I say earnestly. "I'm exhausted. I haven't gotten out of bed all day and I already need a nap. Think of the baby." I encourage, knowing that if this doesn't work, nothing will.

Sinclair searches my face, then softens visibly. He reaches for me, and I hesitantly go to him. "I'm sorry, my love." He purrs, snuggling me close. "My wolf just finds it difficult not to get carried away with you. Have a lie down and I'll bring you something to eat."

My stomach growls right on cue, and I detect a pulse of guilt from Sinclair. He feels like he's been neglecting me, and as pleased as I am to know my body is safe from another onslaught of lust, I can't stand this. I send every bit of denial in my heart straight back at him. "Dominic, I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me these last few

days.

You saved my life again, you took care of me through the worst day of my entire life – the worst emotional and physical pain I've ever known. You forgave me even when we thought I'd killed our baby." I continue, my voice breaking as I recall that pain. "You've done the exact opposite of neglecting me." I proclaim passionately, "I love you so much, and I've been in such heaven the last 24 hours, I just need a break."

Sinclair cuddles me closer. "Thank you, sweetheart," He professes tenderly. "But there's one thing we need to get straight. I love our pup more than life itself, but if I had to choose to save one of you over the other, it wouldn't even be a question for me. We can make another baby, but I can't make another you."

My heart feels full to bursting, and some of the guilt that has been gnawing at me since I was forced to make that terrible decision fades away. I realize that I'd been so afraid of losing Sinclair for trying to save my own life, especially after we'd started out our relationship deeply opposed over my consideration of an abortion.

Something cracks open inside of me, and the next thing I know I'm crying out all the pain and fear – the trauma of everything I've just survived and the joy as well. Sinclair purrs and rocks me in the safe cradle of my nest, and I realize he's crying too. The last few days have been a gauntlet for us both, and we desperately need the catharsis.

Unfortunately, our healing is cut short when Hugo walks in a little while later, a grim expression on his face. "We've got a problem."

Chapter 145 – Damage Control

Sinclair

As soon as Hugo walks into the room, I thrust Ella behind me, a vicious snarl on my lips. My wolf is on high alert from having claimed his mate so recently, his possessive instincts spinning out of control and stronger than I've ever experienced.

She's mine. He thinks angrily, He shouldn't even be allowed to look at her. I can't even process my beta's words, because I'm too preoccupied with guarding Ella – despite the fact that I know my old friend isn't any threat. Still there's no reasoning with a protective wolf, and all mine knows is that another male is in the vicinity of my precious, breeding mate.

Ella, troublemaker that she is, only wriggles her way back into my lap, putting herself between me and the target of my wrath. She pulls my glowing eyes down to her own, both of her small hands framing my face. I glower at the insolent creature, not all pleased that she's stopping me from attacking the interloper, but Ella stares back with unwavering calm. Stop being ridiculous. Her silken voice sounds in my head. It's only Hugo, and I don't have eyes for anyone but you.

It's not your eyes I'm worried about. My wolf replies grumpily. He'd be a fool not to want you and he can't have you. I lower my mouth to her fresh, red mark, breathing in her scent and gently nibbling her tender skin. Mine, mine, mine. A noticeable shiver runs down Ella's spine, and my wolf puffs out his chest with masculine pride.

Naughty mate, I rumble, positively crowing when she shudders again and the scent of her arousal wafts up to me. Her body might be exhausted, but her wolf is as insatiable as my own. Challenging me, pretending to be all can and reasonable when you crave my dominance every bit as much as I need to exert it. Come on, let me bite him just a little – a warning bite, so he remembers who you belong to.

You're impossible. Ella's amused voice accuses, tempting me to turn her over my knee and remind her who's in charge. If I want to attack my Beta, who is she to stop me? Doesn't she realize how special she is, how invaluable? Besides, he said there was a problem. We need to hear him out – what if the Prince is getting ready to stage another attack. He must be furious that we thwarted his plan.

This thought brings reason crashing down, subduing my wolf and focusing my attention back on Hugo, who's been watching our silent exchange with understanding but also quickly waning patience. "What is it?" I demand, snuggling Ella a little closer.

"We just got a report that the Current is getting ready to publish a story about Ella's background." Hugo announces, referencing one of the few newspapers in Moon Valley that aligns politically with the Prince. "Apparently the Prince sent his spies to the shadow

pack to investigate her past... and they figured out that we've been lying about her identity. They don't know she's a human, but they know we haven't been honest."

"What?" I hiss, horrified and devastated by the fear and guilt I feel radiating from Ella. I instinctively begin to purr, but when I look down at my mate she's frozen in place, her beautiful gold eyes wide with horror. "How did this happen?"

"I don't know." Hugo sighs, "If I had to guess I'd say this is another of Lydia's schemes – because of the timing if nothing else."

I let out a volley of ferocious swears, interrupting my purring and startling Ella. My wolf whines in regret and I move my hand to her round belly, checking on our pup. I feel a tiny pulse of unease, and immediately resume my purrs, not speaking again until both mother and child have relaxed. "I should have killed that bitch when I had the chance." I continue a moment later, "What's the Current's angle?"

Hugo looks reluctant to speak, but eventually he says, "that you've been running a morality campaign and the entire time you've been lying to the people and the Alpha council. They're suggesting your entire relationship is a fraud and that Ella is a paid surrogate – they want to know if you have a comment."

"Can we stop it?" I ask. I own some shares in the paper, but I'm afraid that my economic holdings won't do much good if the pack turns against me. "Do you know if anyone else has hold of the story?"

"Not yet." Hugo relates grimly, "And I don't think there's anything we can do to convince them not to print it. They have proof that Ella and Aileen aren't related and that no one with her name ever resided in the territory."

"Damn it." I murmur, trying to wrap my head around this. "Dominic, what do we do?" Ella looks up at me with so much trust and hope, and I realize that she's looking to me for the answer – the solution. This incredible woman, who has only ever been able to rely on herself and fix her own problems, trusts me so much that she's giving me that responsibility. I can't let her down.

"Well..." I begin slowly, working through the possibilities. "The way I see it, we have three options. We can try to get ahead of the story and release it ourselves – say that Ella was a suppressed wolf and our love is real but we hid her past because we were trying to figure out how to wake her wolf.

We can deny it, but if we do then they'll probably start looking closer to home – working backwards to discover how Ella and I met and come to the conclusion that she's a human. We can disprove that now, but it will be even messier if they figure out the truth and we've spent all this time insisting the story is false. Or we can simply say no

comment, and hope that the story doesn't make an impact."

"But it will make an impact – you know it will." Hugo counters seriously. "The other papers will pick it up when they see the evidence, and your refusal to acknowledge the reports will only allow the Prince and anyone else who opposes you to make up more and more outlandish accusations."

He paces back and forth while I absentmindedly croon and pet Ella, who has tears in her eyes for a very different reason than she did a little while ago. I hate that our nascent joy is already coming to pieces... I hate that she's known nothing but fear and stress since coming into my life and that yet again, I can't protect her the way I want. The way she deserves.

"I think our only move is to try and get ahead of the story, control the narrative by framing things ourselves." Hugo advises, looking worried despite his confident tone. "The pack will be more outraged if they think your relationship is fake, than they will if they believe you were just trying to protect your mate when she couldn't access her wolf."

"I think Hugo is right." Ella pipes up, her voice hoarse. "We can spin this in our favor only as long as we get the word out first."

I know they're correct. The problem is that I have a terrible feeling that this scandal might be my downfall. In many ways the Current's reporters are telling the truth. I have been running a campaign on the basis of honesty and virtue, and I have been lying to everyone in the interest of winning. Does it matter that my motives were noble? That my only interest in being King is to keep a tyrant off the throne? That I never asked for this duty, but I'm not going to shirk the responsibility that comes with my power?

My stomach is in knots, but I slowly nod, knowing that this is the only path forward, even if it leads to a dead end. "Call a press conference." I instruct Hugo. "We'll say we're announcing Ella's claiming, that her wolf has been dormant but with the help of the pack elders, we were able to wake it."

If they ask about her past we'll admit that we don't have any answers, and we're just thrilled that we've finally found each other and that we're welcoming a son. And if they accuse us of playing politics, we'll say that I believed Ella would have become an even bigger target if people knew how vulnerable she was."

"And the Prince?" Hugo asks, fully aware of the conversation I had with my father before we went to rescue Ella. "Do you want to come out in the open about his misdeeds – distract the press by claiming he was already trying to kill Ella and the babe, that the only reason you risked waking her wolf while she was pregnant was because he kidnapped her?"

For the first time in a very long time, I'm passed caring about taking the high road. The Prince has been getting away with his crimes for far too long, and it's time the people knew about it. "Fuck it." I growl, squeezing the sweet bundle in my arms, "Let's do it."

Chapter 146 – Press Conference

Ella

Dominic, I'm scared. I confess, speaking through our bond. It hadn't been easy to convince him to let me join the press conference, since I'm technically still supposed to be on bed rest. My blood pressure was still too high when we checked it this afternoon, but it remains to be seen whether that's because of my condition or the stress of the pack finding out about our lies. I've been hoping that the preeclampsia was just a side effect of my wolf being trapped, but what good will that do if our lives fall apart the moment she's freed?

I know, baby. Sinclair purrs, rubbing my back. But I've got you. I'm going to take care of you no matter what happens.

I nuzzle his chest, finding that spot where his scent is the strongest and pressing my nose to it. I breathe in his wonderful scent, taking comfort in his presence and powerful embrace. I know. I tell him, my wolf rising to the surface and taking control of my words, cuz I have the strongest mate in the whole wide world... so handsome, so powerful and caring.

Sinclair's warm chuckle fills my head, and for one blissful moment, I forget why I was upset in the first place. Sinclair is like a ray of sunshine on the darkest day, and that sensation only gets stronger the deeper our connection grows. I am still falling for this man, I realize with surprise.

Despite the fact that I keep thinking I couldn't possibly fall any deeper in love with him, my heart continues to prove me wrong. It seems like every time I think I've reached the bottom of the well, it falls away and introduces me to a new layer of complexity and emotion.

Silly mate, Sinclair murmurs, and I realize I've been unintentionally projecting my thoughts at him again. I feel myself beginning to blush, but when I look up at him, there's only profound understanding on his rugged features. Don't you realize there is no limit – no end to this bond? We're going to keep falling harder and deeper every day together, and we have a lifetime to learn all the different ways we can adore each other.

My heart melts as his words hit home, and I squeeze his middle tightly. It probably feels like nothing to him, but I'm using all my strength. I want him to feel the sheer force of my appreciation for him, and he doesn't leave me hanging.

I feel it, trouble. Don't worry. If I were an outsider observing us right now, I'd probably think we were silly – drunk on our own romance... and maybe we are, but I can't bring myself to care because I'm not on the outside looking in. This is my life and I'll be damned if I'm going to deny myself this joy – not when I've worked so hard and been

through so much to reach this place.

The baby flutters in my womb, and his own happiness in response to our lovey dovey exchange fills me with hope and optimism. We can get through this. I decide, taking strength from my pup and his father. I don't even have to worry about explaining my train of thought to Sinclair, because I'm sure he's felt every step of my feelings journey through our bond. This press conference is just another bump in the road, if we can survive rogue attacks and kidnappings, we can survive a few reporters.

I pull back when Sinclair doesn't respond. I can still feel his outpouring of love, but I realize I can't sense how he's feeling about the imminent conference. Dominic? I ask hesitantly. Am I wrong? Does he think his campaign won't be able to recover from this?

We're going to fight. He tells me, implying his doubts without actually admitting them. If they want to take down our campaign, we're not going to make it easy for them... and no matter what happens, we'll get through it. I'll keep you safe Ella.

I feel myself tremble with unease, despite my faith in my mate. If he's anxious enough to hide it from me, we must be in more trouble than I realized. Hugo walks in, his grave expression only increasing my worry. "It's time."

A sea of reporters spans out in front of us, cameras rolling, recorders held aloft and pens poised to write down every word we speak. As far as I know, no one knows why we've called this conference, so right now the tension in the room is limited to Sinclair, Hugo and I. My mate's arm is secured around my waist, his hand splayed over my belly as I lean into his side.

"Thank you all for coming out today." Sinclair begins, nodding to the various media figures. "Ella and I have an announcement to make, as well as a confession. It pains me to tell you that we haven't been completely honest about Ella's past, because the truth is that when we met and fell in love, her wolf was dormant." Muttering explodes throughout the room, and a number of hands shoot into the air. Still, Sinclair continues in the same steady tone.

"We're not sure how it was able to stay suppressed for so long, only that she was surrendered by her parents to a human orphanage here in moon valley when she was just a baby." The shockwaves Sinclair's words send throughout the room are visible and visceral, and I recall the details he shared with me about the value of shifter children in their society – the neglect such an act would be. "My incredible mate suffered greatly in the hands of the abusive system, forming her own pseudo pack at a young age, and constantly sacrificing herself to protect the other children from harm."

Sinclair pauses to kiss my temple, apparently unable to speak about my childhood traumas without offering me affection. For the first time I'm able to feel his wolf's fury and

vicarious pain for the things I went through, and I'm astonished by the scale and severity of his feelings about it all. I can't help but nuzzle his shoulder, earning myself another kiss. The press all seem too thrown off guard to know what to do, but a few appreciative murmurs reach my ears.

"Ella has always been an Alpha female without ever realizing it, and when we met her wolf finally started to emerge. Until very recently, we believed that it wouldn't be possible to wake her wolf without harming our baby, so we decided to wait until after our son arrives to attempt it." Sinclair explains, his voice as deep as I've ever heard it. I know what's coming next, and I can only hope that it will pay off.

"I've been greatly concerned about Ella's safety throughout this campaign and with good reason – my brave Luna has survived multiple attacks orchestrated by the opposition, becoming a target after the news of her pregnancy was released."

Every hand in the room is now up, and our rabid audience is running out of patience. Sinclair has to raise his voice over the volley of questions in order to be heard. "Most recently, the rogue attack on the city was designed and carried out by Prince Damon.

It started as an attempt to make me look weak, and was later used as a distraction so that the Prince could kidnap Ella and hold her hostage. The Prince rang the all-clear notification early to bring Ella out of hiding, then intercepted her when she attempted to return home – killing all but one of her guards in the process."

Every reporter in the room is shouting now, but Sinclair growls with pure Alpha authority and they quickly pipe down. "I will answer questions once I've completed my statement." He appeases them. "The Prince attempted to force me to end my campaign to be King as ransom for my mate, but he underestimated Ella.

She escaped her captivity only to find herself alone and unprotected in the mountains North of the valley, with no way to reach me. When I finally found her she was frostbitten and near death, having waited until the last possible moment to try to save herself by waking her wolf. She took a sacred herb provided to us by pack elders just before I arrived, and went through her first shift thinking we'd lost our son.

Fortunately this was not the case, and our pup is safe and sound, continuing to grow stronger in his mother's womb." i

"My public silence since the rogue attack was caused by my mate's kidnap, then getting her through the shift, and finally claiming her the way we've both been dreaming about for so long. I realize the things I'm telling you are shocking, and I can only offer my deepest apologies for my dishonesty. I assure you that I would never have lied to you if I felt I had a choice.

These last months have been incredibly difficult for Ella and I, and though we are overjoyed to finally be bonded mates, we couldn't in good conscience continue to let you believe a lie that was no longer necessary, or to remain in the dark about the kind of ruler Prince Damon would be."

He gazes around at the stunned audience with the air of a predator about to pounce, and I have to fight back the urge to smile. "I'm pleased to report that we finally have proof of his crimes, so my question for you is whether you'd like to move on to questions – or would you like to see the evidence against him?"

Chapter 147 – Evidence

Ella

The room erupts with noise, as various reporters cry out, “What evidence!?” Sinclair nods to the side door, and his father wheels into the room, followed by a group of grief-stricken she-wolves and my surviving guard. “The evidence is the lives the Prince stole to kidnap Ella, the widows who don’t even have the ability to lay their husbands to rest because he hid their husband’s bodies.

The children Damon rendered fatherless in pursuit of the throne. The evidence is the eye-witness testimony of Ella and her guard, of myself and my men when we met Damon to set the ransom. The evidence is the all-clear chime everyone in the valley heard even though the battle was still waging on their television screens. The evidence is my father’s paralysis, which was the result of an attack orchestrated by the King during his own campaign – a strategy he clearly taught his son.”

The door opens again, and a number of shackled rogues are brought into the room, looking furious and sullen. “The evidence is the rogues Damon hired to attack his own people, whose financial records show lump sum deposits from off-shore bank accounts just before the battle.

It’s even in the Prince’s inaction when the people he claims to love were under attack. And for anyone who might discard the testimony of these people for being my allies or in compromised positions, then I offer you the video footage of the Prince arriving at our hostage meeting, unbeknownst that Ella had already escaped and I was on my way to find her.”

Sinclair and I move away from the podium to give the room full view of the screen against the back wall, where a black and white image has suddenly appeared from a projector mounted on the ceiling. When Sinclair told me that he’d sent a few enforcers to the second ransom meeting to observe the Prince and notify him of the other man’s movements, he hadn’t mentioned that he’d also had them transmitting footage of the set up to Roger, or that his brother had recorded it.

I’m honestly not sure he remembered, as chaotic as everything has been, because it wasn’t until Roger offered the footage after learning about the press conference that he even realized it might be useful as evidence.

As the feed begins to play, a timestamp appears on the bottom corner of the screen, revealing the date for the audience. The Prince is shown with an army at his back, pacing back and forth in frustration through what appears to be an abandoned warehouse. “Where the hell are they?” He demands, “They should have been here by now!”

“Sinclair’s probably just trying to set up his own perimeter.” His second in command suggests. “Then why haven’t any of our lookouts sighted him?” Damon hisses. “No, I don’t like it. Something is off here.”

“You think it’s a trick, or a trap?” The beta inquires, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. The Prince stomps his foot. “I told her! I told that dumb bitch he wouldn’t just give up his campaign – even for his mate. He’s up to something.”

“But what, a rescue? An Ambush?” The other man presses, clearly agitated by his Alpha’s foul mood. “Maybe both.” The Prince growls. “Move out, and I want eyes on the girl right now, get in touch with the sentries we posted outside her room.”

The video goes dark as the Prince and his army exit the warehouse, but from the heavy silence in the room, it seems as though the footage was compelling enough to give our critics pause. I admit I’m amazed about how damning the scene was, despite being so brief. They actually managed to catch the Prince referencing Sinclair by name, as well as the ransom. No one might have said my name, but it’s difficult to find another explanation than the one we’ve provided.

The utter stillness is shattered after a pregnant pause, as all the reporters seem to come back to their senses at once. They surge to their feet, shouting questions over one each other in such a way that it makes it impossible to hear. Sinclair leads me back to the podium, pointing towards a man in the front row.

“Alpha, if there have been other crimes then why haven’t you ever accused the Prince before now?” He asks eagerly.

“For a long time Damon and I have been caught in a shadow war. I’ve known what the Prince is capable of for years, which is why I’ve been so devoted to opposing him. Still, it wasn’t until Ella came on the scene and he realized he might lose that he started to escalate his tactics. My father taught me that you don’t make accusations of this sort with evidence, and until now, I’ve only had my wolf’s instincts to rely on.

This is the first time I’ve had the proof to bring our war out in the open, but trust me when I tell you that I haven’t let his offenses go unchecked. My strategy might be different, but I’ve defended this pack and my family with force when required, and done everything in my power to keep Moon Valley safe.”

There’s another uproar, and then Sinclair points to another reporter for the next question. “Ella, how did you escape the Prince? Were you mistreated when you were his captive?”

I’m slightly startled to be addressed directly, but Sinclair gives me an encouraging squeeze. I take a steadying breath, “The Prince kept me in the Royal Palace, and I was

able to contact Dominic through a dream –”

“Because she’s the cleverest, most resourceful she-wolf I’ve ever met.” Dominic praises me, puffed up with Alpha pride.

“Not now, Dominic.” I sass, pushing at his scruffy jaw as he tries to kiss me again. He rumbles in warning and I shiver, sending a wave of laughter through the crowd.

“Anyway, I told him where I was and he explained about emergency evacuation tunnels in the Palace and how to find them. Luckily I was able to find one in my room, but unfortunately it was incredible long and landed me in the wilderness very far away – as my mate said.”

I look around at the curious faces before continuing, trying to decide how to explain my new traumas. “And the worst part about being held hostage came before and after. I was devastated when my guards were killed... I tried to prevent it, to save them but it didn’t do any good, and after –”

“How?” Someone shouts, “I thought your wolf wasn’t awake yet so how did you defend them?”

I freeze for a moment, and my surviving guard steps up, emotion thick in his voice. “She sacrificed herself for us, thinking they would stop the attack once they had her. I was only able to get away because they thought I was dead.”

“We were so outnumbered that I knew there was no chance we could win. I didn’t realize that they only meant to kidnap me, but I knew my fate was sealed... I figured theirs didn’t have to be, and I was wrong.” A runaway tear slips from my lashes and I quickly skype it away, trying not to break down in public.

“And after escaping, I kept going as long as I possibly could, but I didn’t have a coat, let alone my wolf... and eventually I had to make the decision no mother should ever have to contemplate. Whether to save my own life and end my baby’s, or to let us both die from hypothermia. Nothing the Prince and Lydia said or did to me could ever compare with that pain.”

I might be imagining it, but I can see nothing but sympathy and admiration in the faces around us, and then another reporter shouts, “if he’s been attacking your mate, then why not kill him? What kind of an Alpha would just stand by and let him try again?”

“Because I believe in the rule of law.” Sinclair rumbles, his wolf glowing in his eyes.

“Believe me, I wanted nothing more than to kill him and still do, but if I did I wouldn’t be any better than he is. The ability not to rashly act on my impulses is what sets the Prince and I apart –”

“That and having a conscience.” I add saucily, earning a wolfish grin from my mate. “Our system of governance is what allows us to maintain peace in the united packs. It’s the reason we advanced out of the dark ages, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to undermine it with my own personal vendetta. Some might call that weak, but if you ask me the far weaker move is to target a breeding she-wolf because you’re too spineless to take on your opponent directly.”

Murmurs of agreement travel throughout the room, and I feel my heart leap. This is working – they’re all so distracted by the Prince’s crimes that no one even seems to care about our lies. Of course, as soon as I think this, another reporter asks, “Ella, if you didn’t know you were a shifter, how did you and the Alpha meet?”

I look up at Sinclair, unsure of whether I should tell the truth. We discussed this beforehand, knowing the question might come up, but we hadn’t reached a solution. Instead we decided to decide based on the feeling in the room, and now here we are. If I tell the truth it could unravel this whole thing, but if I lie it could backfire and dig us into even deeper trouble.

What should I say? I silently ask my mate. It’s your call, baby. I trust you. I look back at the crowd, trying not to telegraph my uncertainty. They’re all waiting expectantly, and I need to decide quickly. Do I lie, or do I tell the truth?

Chapter 148 – The Prince’s Fury

3rd Person

Prince Damon stared at the television screen, apoplectic with rage. He didn’t know how Sinclair found out about the story he’d leaked to the Current, and he didn’t really care. The end result was the same: Here was the Moon Valley Alpha and his wretched little Luna on live TV, accusing him of corruption and murder. What was worse, the reporters were eating it up without any semblance of concern for the lies Sinclair had been telling these last few months.

The Prince’s own investigators hadn’t figured out that Ella had been living as a human all these years, and now it seemed there wouldn’t be any need for them to continue digging, because she was about to explain how this all began.

The glowing she-wolf exchanged a nod with her mate, before turning back to the crowd. “The truth is that the beginning of our relationship is a mystery to us both. We were both desperate for children, after years of trying and failing with our partners. I didn’t know it at the time, but I wasn’t conceiving because I was with a human, and long story short, I went to a sperm bank thinking it was my last chance to get pregnant. Dominic had sent his own sperm there for analysis, and somehow it ended up getting mixed up with the sample from the donor I’d chosen.”

“When Dominic scented his heir in my womb a few days later, we didn’t understand how I was able to conceive a shifter’s child, and now of course the mystery is who or what led to that fateful mix up, because we might not have created this baby the traditional way, but we fell in love so fast and fiercely that there’s no doubt it was meant to be.” She explains, her silken voice full of warmth as she gazes up at the Alpha in question. “All we can say is the Goddess works in mysterious ways.”

Excited mutters about the goddess and fate wove throughout the room, and Prince Damon gripped the back of the sofa so hard that his claws ripped into the upholstery. This was unbelievable. Why didn’t anyone care that they had been lying all this time — they’d just confessed they didn’t even know each other when the bitch conceived and the press was still fawning all over them. Romantic fools! He thought bitterly. What was wrong with this species? So brainless that they could be swayed by starry eyed fantasies and fairy tales about the Goddess.

He shut the television off when one of the reporters obsequiously cried, “When did you realize you were in love?”

“Bring Lydia to me, right now.” He ordered the guard beside him, “ Then tell my father to clear his schedule. We need to talk.”

When Lydia walked in a little while later, her demeanor skittish and uncertain, he could

only growl wordlessly. “What’s happened?” She asked, clearly balking.

“Sinclair’s outmaneuvered us again. He just announced that Ella’s wolf was dormant and that he lied about her past to protect her.”

The Prince explained. “Then he accused me of planning the rogue attack and kidnapping her, and he had footage of the second meeting!”

Lydia’s eyes widened in horror, and she began backing away from him warily. “The current must have called them for a comment on the story.”

“A comment! A comment!” Damon ranted. “And you didn’t think that Sinclair would take the opportunity to beat us to the punch!

Nobody even cares that they lied because he turned it into a fucking romantic comedy! I told you that this was your last chance, you stupid cow!”

‘But it wasn’t my fault!’ Lydia cried, fear rolling off of her in waves. “All I’ve ever done is try to help you!”

“I never would have kidnapped Ella if it wasn’t for you — they would never have had that footage, Sinclair would have continued to quietly counter us in private if we hadn’t pissed him off so much!” The Prince thundered, stalking Lydia across the room, his wolf glowing in his eyes. “You’ve done nothing but screw things up from the first moment you walked into my life, and now you’ve ruined any chance I had at being King!”

“Then I’ll leave!” Lydia offered frantically, correctly sensing the mortal danger she was facing. “I’ll go away and you’ll never hear from me again, you have my word.”

Women. Damon mused bitterly. Always so eager to stick their noses where they don’t belong, but never willing to take responsibility for their actions. Never willing to get their hands dirty themselves. In that moment, the hints Ella had dropped about the Princess’s murder suddenly clicked in Damon’s mind.

Poison. He thought, that’s why Ella said it was a feminine tactic, because it’s passive. Maybe it was the way Lydia was cowering in front of him, but Ella’s next clue suddenly seemed only too obvious. Who would benefit from her death?

Understanding crashed into Damon, and suddenly all of Lydia’s actions since she had inserted herself into his world made sense.

He realized that she’d always attached herself to powerful men, bouncing from one to the next every time they became wise to her treachery. “But you don’t have anywhere to go, do you?” The Prince responded in a snarl. “Your husband tossed you to the curb,

Sinclair rejected you. You've never worked a day in your life, it must have seemed like a golden opportunity when I suddenly became single, right when you were on the verge of losing everything. In fact, that was quite some coincidence, wasn't it?"

Lydia trembled violently as the Prince moved nearer, circling like a bird of prey. She turned as he moved, afraid to let him out of her line of sight. "W-what do you mean?"

"Well it strikes me that she was killed in a woman's restroom. And no male wolves were scented around her body." He reasoned sharply. "And poison... such an non-confrontational weapon."

"Listen, I know what you think, but it isn't true." Lydia stammered. "You're letting them trick you. I know Ella put these ideas in your head."

"The only way you could know that is if you were eavesdropping." Damon accused angrily. "And they're not the only ones who have been trying to manipulate me." He continued, thinking of Sinclair's comments about Lydia's interference. He might be a despicable, self-righteous, mongrel — but he hadn't been wrong about his ex-wife's insolence. "You probably thought you could make me fall for you eventually, if you played your cards right. Tell me, did you want to help me or yourself, Lydia? Did you care if I became King, or did you just want to be a queen and you were willing to go through anyone and anything that stood in your way?"

"It wasn't like that!" Lydia insisted desperately. "And besides, Angeline's death helped your campaign more than all of your efforts to discredit Sinclair combined."

"So that's your defense? You killed my mate, but I shouldn't be bothered because it helped me in the polls?"

"No! Of course not!" Lydia pleaded, knowing she was backed into a corner now but helpless to think of a way out. "I didn't... I didn't kill her. I would never do such a thing, you have to believe me!"

"You were willing to let your own fated mate die for your ambitions." Damon reminded her. "You didn't care about attacking a breeding woman and killing her unborn pup despite your supposed love for children. So why should you give a damn about my mate?"

"Because I respect you too much to ever cross you." Lydia professed, dropping to her knees. "You're my Prince, I would never do anything to displease you."

"And when did that begin? You helped Sinclair oppose me for years with no such loyalty. Let's be honest, Lydia. Your allegiance goes to the highest bidder, the man who can offer you the most power and status." The Prince grumbled, unable to see

her true colors now that they'd been revealed. "You're a scheming, gold-digging, narcissist, and you saw fit to take my mate — your princess — from me, for your own selfish gain.

Lydia tearfully shook her head, knowing she'd lost. "Please, just let me go, I'll do anything."

"It's too late for that." Damon snapped, closing the distance between them. "I should have done this the moment you tried to tell me how to run my own fucking campaign."

"Please, have mercy." Lydia begged, sobbing now as she tried to scabble away from the approaching predator.

"Shut the hell up!" Damon snarled, lashing out with his claws. He wanted to make her suffer — it was, after all, the only thing she-wolves were good for in his mind, but he didn't have time to waste. He needed to speak with his father and do damage control before the Alpha Council could think to issue a warrant for his arrest, and torturing the worthless creature in front of him would only cut into that — no matter how pleasurable it might be. His claws caught Lydia neck and dug deep, ripping out her throat and ceasing her pitiful moaning once and for all.

Her lifeless body fell at his feet, and he stepped over her and strode out the door, wiping her blood on his trousers. "Clean that up." He ordered the stone faced guard at the door, before he disappeared down the hall, headed for the King's study.

Chapter 149 – The Prince’s Gambit

King Andras was watching the press conference when his son stormed in, blood dripping from his claws. When Damon entered, the conference was winding down, with Sinclair thanking the press for their support and apologizing again for their deception. He called for action against the Prince, stating that the fate of the united packs was at risk if the Alpha Council did not act.

‘You idiot.’ He growled at his son, clicking off the television. ‘What the hell were you thinking?’

‘I took the wrong advice, but I’ve dealt with that now.’ Damon answered snidely, ‘I got rid of that no-good bitch once and for all.’

‘That’s what you get for taking the advice of a woman.’ The King grouched. ‘And if that weren’t bad enough, your incompetence has just cost our family the crown!’

‘Me!’ Damon exclaimed in outrage, ‘You’re the one who’s being removed from the throne, the only reason I’m in this position in the first place is that you were too weak to fight the council and instead expected me to save your ass and the family legacy! You weren’t even going to let me rule if I won! You expected me to be your fucking puppet!’

‘Because you don’t have what it takes to lead!’ King Andras shouted. ‘You do shit like this! Thinking violence can solve all your problems, acting without thinking, taking strategy from a traitorous whore with more cunning than common sense!’

‘Oh like you’re so different!’ The Prince scoffed cruelly. ‘You stole the crown exactly the same way I tried to, so if you want to blame anyone for my mistakes, look in the damned mirror!’

He charged towards his heir, rage coloring his face bright red. ‘I had the wisdom to know when to strike and who to target. I didn’t go after an innocent she-wolf, I went after my enemy himself and I pulled it off because I planned and accounted for every last contingency. I didn’t just take it into my head to kill Henry Sinclair and start lashing out at him any way I could, regardless of the collateral damage! I didn’t risk the lives of the citizens I rule or align myself with extremists! I didn’t commit treason! I made a single, strategic strike and took out the competition. It’s not about morality or nobility, it’s about using your bloody head, Damon!’

‘Weil if you’re so smart, tell me how we’re supposed to get out of this without taking extreme action!’ Damon shouted, livid that his father wasn’t taking his side.

King Andras shook his head in disbelief. ‘There is no getting out of this, boy. The damage is done and if you think the council will overlook your traitorous plots you are out of your mind. The only option you have now is to run before they can take you into

custody.”

“Run, go into exile?” Damon spat, “that’s your grand plan? Don’t you care that Sinclair will become King? That our family will lose everything?”

“Of course I care, you insolent pup.” Andras snarled. “But a good Alpha has to know when they’re beaten, and trust me when I tell you that we are.”

“Not if we gather the royal army.” Damon insisted petulantly, stomping his foot. “If we act quickly we could overthrow the Alpha council, Sinclair, all of them. Without their interference and regulations, our power could be limitless. No more quibbling diplomacy, everyone shouting over one another in order to be heard and get their own way. Total authority.”

‘You mean total tyranny.’ King Andras replied, so shocked by the Prince’s suggestion that he had to sit down. ‘You’re suggesting we undo years of peace, throw out the constitution and reform the united packs as an

empire ruled by nothing but your own greed.’ The horror in his eyes was obvious to his son, and he made no effort to hide it. “In all my years I never ... where did I go so wrong with you?”

“So you would rather give up, tuck in our tails and accept defeat? That’s pathetic.” Damon derided. “Clearly the council was right to unseat you if this is how you respond to a challenge. You don’t even have the will to fight, to defend what’s rightfully yours!”

“Maybe you’re right.” Andras grimaced, feeling overwhelmed with the depth of his failure as a father. “Because Goddess help me, but right now I can’t help rooting for Sinclair. If the only alternative to my rule is yours or his, then I would gladly choose him.”

“No!” Damon roared, his adrenaline spiking. “You can’t do this! It isn’t fair! I’m your heir! The throne is supposed to be mine! He can’t have it and I will not run scared!”

“You don’t have another choice. You made this bed and you are the one who has to lie in it.” Andras declared firmly, “I won’t protect you from the consequences, Damon. As far as I’m concerned, you are no longer my son.”

The king sat back in his chair, mind reeling, still at a loss to process the shock of this conversation. He’d known Damon was not fit to be King for some time now, but he didn’t realize the boy was so unhinged. He thought he could control him, teach him, and it had just become painfully obvious that neither would ever be possible.

Still, he didn’t expect what was coming next. He never would have imagined his only son might turn his violence onto him, but that’s exactly what he did. While the King was still

sitting there, a grim expression on his face, Damon pounced. He shifted in a flash, sinking his fangs into his father's exposed throat before the King even knew what was happening.

The king was dead in an instant, and unable to defend himself or conceptualize this new betrayal. When Damon shifted back into human form, spitting out his father's blood and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he looked down at the older man with smug triumph. "Now you are no longer my father, what do you think of that, Dad?"

Moving quickly he swept out of the room and found a fresh change of clothes, before going to his beta with the news of the King's demise." Announce to everyone that Sinclair invaded the palace and killed the king, and get rid of the body so they can't analyze the crime scene." He ordered. "Whatever you do, don't make the announcement until the scene has been swept."

'Then mobilize the Royal Army, if they question my authority then tell them that I'm my father's heir and the United Packs are under attack, that I'm King for all intents and purposes until the Alpha Council can choose another. You can also tell them that the sentence for insubordination will be death... I also need poison" Damon decided, thinking that as cowardly as Lydia's tactics were, there was no doubting they were effective. The average soldier wouldn't be any match for the Alphas on the council, but the overblown leaders wouldn't ever anticipate a poisoning.

"We have to get rid of the Alpha Council if we're going to pull this off. Find the most potent poison you can and send a team to the council chambers – they're bound to be meeting in order to determine what to do about Sinclair's accusations. If we act quickly we can take them all out at once. Slip the poison into the coffee service before the servants take it up."

"But if we're poisoning the council, why do we need the army?" His beta interrupted, seeming overwhelmed by everything that was happening, but clearly not feeling brave enough to push back at his Alpha.

"Because the army is for Sinclair." Damon explained through gritted teeth, not having any patience for being questioned.

"I thought... isn't Sinclair on the council?" The beta questioned.

'Yes but he won't be present if they're debating his accusations – he has a conflict of interest. We're going to have to go after him on his own turf, and it's going to take as many soldiers as we can summon." the Prince

snapped. "And once he's out of the way it's going to take the full force of the army to squash any unrest in the united packs."

“Damon, are you sure about all this?” His beta questioned hesitantly. “You’re talking about a full on coup.”

The Prince rolled his eyes. “I just killed my own father, do you really think I care about the alpha council or a load of peasants?” He demanded severely. “We’ve got a huge task ahead of us and I need to know that you’re with me, because if you aren’t. I’ll find someone who is.”

“No – no I’m with you.” The beta promised, fear dilating his pupils.

“Good. By this time tomorrow we’ll be the most powerful men on the continent. We’ll have the entire world at our feet.” He turned to the window, looking out on Moon Valley with a cold, rapacious gaze. “First the Alpha Council, then Sinclair.”

Chapter 150 – Flight

Ella

“Ella, Ella wake up.” Sinclair’s urgent voice invades my dreams, just as the ground begins to tremble beneath my feet. As I’m wrenched awake, I realize the ground wasn’t trembling at all, instead my sleeping body was being shaken by my mate. Sinclair’s handsome face hovers above my own, his eyes glowing as his hand rests on my shoulder. “Come on baby, we’ve got to go.”

“I- what? What do you mean?” I mumble groggily. “We’re under attack, we have to go, sweetheart.” Sinclair explains, pulling me up. “There’s no time to take anything with us, just get dressed.”

“But I don’t understand, under attack from who?” I ask, feeling as though my mind is dragging. When we went to bed tonight we’d been overjoyed with our victory at the press conference, thinking we were out of the

woods at long last. We made love and I passed out to the blissful sound of Sinclair’s contented purrs. What he’s saying simply doesn’t make any sense.

“The Royal Army, I promise I’ll explain everything later, but right now I need you to just do as I say.” He strides to the closet in a flash, returning with my warmest sweater and a pair of fleece lined leggings, as well as my coat and a pair of boots.

Clearly sensing that I’m too shocked and drowsy to keep up with the crisis threatening us, he dresses me with cool efficiency, only pausing to retrieve a pair of thick wool socks from the dresser before lacing up my boots.

Sinclair returns to the closet to dress himself while I sit on the edge of the bed in a daze, belatedly realizing he forgot to provide me with underwear. I open my mouth to tell him as much, but he simply scoops me up in his arms, “We’ll buy you some once we’re safe, trouble.” He promises, then sweeps me out of the room. Sinclair carries me down to the mansion’s basement level, surrounded by guards.

Hugo comes running up to us just before we enter an evacuation tunnel I didn’t know existed. “I got word to Roger and your father. They’ll meet us there.”

“Where’s there?” I ask anxiously, my wolf reaching out to Sinclair’s to try to get a sense of his feelings. Once again I realize he’s blocking off his emotions from me, only this time he’s not letting the good things shine through. I can’t get any sense of his feelings at all, feeling as though I’m reaching into an empty void. “We’re leaving the continent.” Sinclair informs me tightly.

“Leaving the continent?” I repeat, stunned. This is unfathomable to me, I’ve never been

off the continent in my entire life, and the idea that Sinclair would be leaving his pack behind just doesn't compute. If the situation is severe enough to force us out of Moon Valley, why wouldn't we just go to another territory, a neighboring pack?

'Things are bad baby.' Sinclair murmurs, not slowing his pace as we continue through the tunnel at a jog. The tunnel lets out into a darkened garage, and we pile into a collection of jeeps reinforced to look more like army tanks than standard vehicles.

As we speed out of the city, Sinclair is in constant communication with his men, going over our route and making preparations for the journey ahead. It's not until the logistics have all been sorted out that he finally turns to me.

He rumbles with concern and drags me into his lap, and I tuck my head against his shoulder. Sinclair takes a deep breath, then tells me. 'The Prince has taken over the united packs, Ella. The King is dead, the Alpha council are all dead. It would seem our decision to call him out and the threat of losing his position pushed him over the edge.

He's deployed the royal army to lock down Moon Valley, and likely sent assassins to take out the betas of the other packs so they can't coordinate against him as a shadow council. By this time tomorrow, he will have total control of the pack armies as well as his own.'

'Oh my Goddess.' Tears burn in my eyes. This was everything we'd been afraid of, only worse. All the shifters and humans left in the Valley would – 'Wait!' I exclaim frantically. 'Cora! We have to take her with us!'

'Roger and Dad are picking her up on their way out of the city.' Sinclair informs me gently, purring to try and ease my distress. 'She'll be okay, and she'll be with us soon.'

I feel so grateful for my mate in this moment that I could kiss him, but he's holding me too tightly to move. Instead I kiss his neck and thank him profusely as he cuddles me like a human security blanket. When I'm done showing my thanks, I'm able to turn my thoughts to the future. 'Dominic, what are we going to do?'

'We're going to go west, to the hidden territories.' Sinclair answers decisively. 'I have some allies there, and the Prince will have his hands so full just trying to suppress the unrest his coup will cause that he won't be able to spare forces to come after us.'

'Where are the hidden territories?' I ask, trying to imagine which points on the human maps might align with such a name.

'Between here and the Veran continent.' Sinclair shares, confusing me to no end.

'But there isn't anything between here and Vera.' I remind him, trying to figure out if he's

lost his mind or perhaps I've lost mine. "Only the ocean."

"That's why they're hidden, trouble." Sinclair explains, pressing a few kisses to my forehead. "The lands were previously uninhabited, and were settled by wolves who were tired of having to keep their true natures secret – they wanted to live away from humans, so they formed a federation of shifter- only societies. Shifters have always had more advanced technologies, so this all happened before the human populations began exploring the world, and when they started, the wolves in the hidden territories made sure the continent couldn't be found."

"But now we have satellites and cross the oceans in airplanes and everything." I say, not entirely understanding how this could be possible. Then again, I went my whole life living with shifters right under my nose and never knew they existed, so I suppose it shouldn't seem quite so outlandish.

"Yes, but we have shielding technology that makes it impossible to detect the territories from all sides. The shields project whatever images one would expect to see from their particular perspective, so from above it simply looks like more water." Sinclair explains, rubbing my belly and making Rafe kick up a storm.

"Okay." I can accept this explanation, since I've seen first hand how far ahead shifters are when it comes to technology, but this doesn't account for everything. "And what about boats? If they're sailing along and the captain only sees open ocean ahead, why don't humans sail into them?"

"Because it doesn't just look like open ocean, the shields project the image of a massive storm so that sailers won't enter the territory's waters, they'll sail around the storm and if they get too close their equipment starts going haywire." Sinclair tells me, seeming more and more relaxed the farther we get from Moon Valley. Instead of simply clutching me against his chest his hands are gradually beginning to explore my body, though I suppose this could be another comfort mechanism – ensuring that I'm whole and unharmed. "That's where all the human legends about the Dark Triangle come from." 1

My jaw drops with amazement, every child in the world has heard tales of that mysterious point in the ocean where magic seems to routinely disappear ships and aircraft. "You mean we're going there? To the Dark Triangle?" I exclaim with excitement, momentarily forgetting my distress due to the sheer astonishment of hearing I'm going to a mythical land.

Sinclair's lip quirks, "If I'd known that's all I needed to say to ease your mind I would have started with it. Yes, sweet mate, we're going to the Dark Triangle." He confirms, "though the people there might be offended if you call it that. In truth we'll land in a territory called Vanara. It will be very different from home, but it will be safe."

"I... are we-" I'm not sure how to ask my next question, and in the end I just blurt it out. "Is this forever?"

"No." Sinclair replies firmly. "Once we arrive I'm going to rally the Alphas of the federation to move against the Prince. I'll take whatever support they're willing to give, and I'll use my spies back home to form a citizen army... a rebellion. When the time is right we'll return." He pauses and looks down at me with regret. "At least I will."

"You mean... alone?" I inquire, aghast.

"Yes." He sighs, and he opens a floodgate of emotion to me, revealing how much he hates this thought. "Because when I go back, I'll be going to war."

Chapter 151 – Exile

Ella

The journey to the hidden territories was swift once we reached the coast. We boarded a small plane and ascended into the heavens at top speed, and I swear Sinclair didn't relax until we were cruising at 30,000 feet. I didn't realize how tense he'd been even after we left Moon Valley, until we were out of danger and his muscles finally unwound.

The flight took more than six hours, though I slept most of the way. When we finally landed Sinclair gently untangled our bodies, which instantly woke me. I emit a sleepy moan, looking up at him blearily. "Are we there?"

"Yes," He confirms, leaning over to cup my cheek. "But stay here until I can make sure it's safe, okay?"

Without another word, he disappears out the door with his men, descending the small staircase leading down to the tarmac. I lurch to my feet, moving to the windows to look outside. My first glimpse of the hidden territories takes my breath away; the horizon is dominated by a glittering lake, framed beneath the towering peaks of snow-capped mountains. At the center of the lake, looking as though it's floating on the water, is an opulent city which is only visible at certain angles. The rest of the time it looks like nothing more than a ball of light.

Eager to get out and explore, I quickly spy my mate, prowling around the area with Hugo and our guards to make sure no danger is hiding just out of sight. In the distance I can also see a line of shiny cars waiting for us, and I roll my eyes. Overprotective wolves.

I emerge from the plane and breathe in the foreign air, my newly awakened senses assailed by strange and unfamiliar scents. I cradle my belly in my arms, feeling a wave of curiosity from my pup. Rafe may not know what's going on, but he knows I'm feeling alight with interest. "Are you ready, my darling?" I ask him, "We're going on an adventure." He flutters in my womb, and I feel thoroughly encouraged.

I don't even get to the end of the platform before Sinclair turns and sees me. A wave of disapproval assails me, and then his voice sounds in my head. I told you to stay put.

What, so you can protect me from all this fresh air and the beautiful landscapes? I sass in reply, taking the first step down the stairway. Sinclair bounds to my side in an instant, scooping me up and growling deep in his chest. "Naughty mate, you have no idea what dangers could be awaiting us."

"Oh, like the bath snakes you once warned me about?" I ask archly, finding it impossible not to smile at the memory.

'That was a joke. This isn't.' Sinclair grimaces. 'We're in unknown territory now – quite literally. Don't ask me to take your safety for granted because I won't do it, Ella.'

'We have to feel safe somewhere, Dominic.' I reply gently, stroking his jaw. 'Otherwise we'll drive ourselves crazy with worry.'

'The only place I ever feel you're safe is when you're in my arms.' Sinclair shares, and suddenly I understand why he's always touching me. It's not only for affection, but his own comfort as well.

'Then what on earth were you doing leaving me alone in a plane?' I tease, nuzzling my face against his neck.

My mate shakes his head with an indulgent purr, 'how we ever thought you were human, I'll never know.' Sinclair remarks dryly. 'Only she-wolves can manage to be so insolent and so sweet at once.'

I giggle as he carries me down the steps, belatedly realizing that we probably left the secrets of my past behind and out of reach. Of course, thoughts of my past only make me think of my sister, 'When will Cora arrive?' 1

'Soon.' Sinclair promises, kissing my brow. 'They were coming from the shadow pack.' I don't need more explanation. When we fled we took different paths for the sake of safety, and Roger, Henry and Cora had gone east while we'd gone west. It makes sense that the others had a longer journey.

As Sinclair carries me towards the line of cars, the back door to the middle vehicle opens, and then a distinguished looking man emerges. He's probably five or six years older than Sinclair, and thus a decade older than me, but he welcomes us with a wide smile and open arms. 'Dorn!'

'Gabriel!' Sinclair replies, flashing his fangs but showing no aggression. He puts me down only long enough to embrace the other man, then promptly tucks me under his arm. 'This is my mate, Ella. Ella, this is King Gabriel Montclair of Vanara.'

My eyes widen when I hear this man is royalty, but then again my mate was almost a king as well. I extend my hand to him, 'Pleasure to meet you.'

Gabriel clasps both of his hands around mine. 'It's an honor.' He replies warmly, a somber note entering his expression as he looks back and forth between us. 'I'm so sorry for all you've been through.'

'Why? You didn't do it.' I quip, before I can think better of it.

Gabriel's tender expression cracks, and then he's throwing his head back with laughter. "Well I see why you picked her, Dorn." He expresses to Sinclair, even though the mood has been permanently dampened. "But I do feel for you. It's all over the news and I can't believe it. How one man could take out the entire Alpha council, all the betas. It's unthinkable."

"Well he didn't do it on his own, or honorably," Sinclair grumbles. By now I've been caught up on all the developments regarding the Prince's coup, and I know these wolves consider the use of poison a cowardly, disgraceful tactic. "Still, it is hard to fathom." He agrees, squeezing me a bit more tightly. "But we're here now, and we can only move forward."

"Damn right." Gabriel confirms, gripping my mate's shoulder. "Come on, we've got a welcome party awaiting you."

I dig in my heels. "But what about Cora and Henry?" I ask anxiously. "What about Roger?"

"A couple of the cars will stay behind to collect your family once they arrive." The King announces, surprising me. He certainly seems very clued in to our affairs. Though I suppose this should be the case, since he's made all the arrangements.

I'm still not convinced, and though Sinclair could easily sweep me along against my will, he turns to me and rests a hand on my tummy. "We need to get settled and find you a doctor. As soon as the others arrive we'll meet them."

"Why a doctor?" I demand indignantly, feeling defiant for reasons I don't understand.

Of course, Sinclair doesn't seem to have any issues understanding. He simply purrs and shifts nearer. "You haven't been examined since your wolf woke, and we've been through a lot. You need a check up."

"But Rafe is fine." I insist, notching my chin up.

"He might be, but I want to know about you." Sinclair murmurs in a firm tone. "Don't you want to find out if you can come off bed rest?"

I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, sulking even though he's right – or perhaps because he is. "Yes." I murmur sullenly.

Sinclair rumbles out a knowing laugh, sweeping my legs back up into his arms. "That's what I thought."

Sinclair gives me the window seat in the car so that I can stare out at my new

surroundings, marveling at the incredible lands which turn everything I believed I knew about the world upside down. Sinclair has been here before, and he's more concerned with talking logistics with the King, so he simply strokes my spine as I turn my whole body to the glass and gaze out in awe. It's beyond surreal. Once upon a time I suppose people had to travel in order to know what the rest of the world looked like, but with modern technology I thought I'd seen photos and videos of just about every corner of our planet. Now I'm learning I was very wrong.

"What do you think, trouble?" Sinclair asks as the Alpha's come to a pause in their conversation.

We're currently speeding over a mirrored bridge which makes it feel as if we're driving right across the surface of the lake, and the closer we get to the city, I realize why it seemed to glow: It's a city made entirely of glass. It reminds me of the intricate ice sculptures I've seen at winter fairs, when artists create entire worlds out of the beautiful but impractical substance." It's incredible." I breathe. "I've never seen anything like it... but how is it possible? I would have thought glass was too fragile for such complex structures."

"Ah, but it's not glass." King Gabriel corrects with a wry smile. "It's a rare crystal found only on this continent – called Vanarium. It's stronger even than diamonds, and conducts energy so that the city powers itself without any need for polluting fuels or alternative energies." 2

"Amazing." I murmur, my heart skipping a beat as we finally enter the gates of the city. The cars wind through glittering, peaceful streets which are so clean I feel I could eat off the pavement without complaint. All the people turn and wave as we pass, and I wonder if the King's vehicles are different enough from the common peoples to be so obvious. I'm surprised when I see some shifters in their wolf forms, who gallop alongside the car by way of greeting. They all look so happy, but I can't help feeling as though something is missing here.

"There are no forests." I realize after a moment.

"Not all wolves are forest dwellers." Sinclair explains, "each pack has their own element – the Vanarans draw strength from water and prefer wide open spaces."

"Oh." I deflate a little, and Sinclair gives me a squeeze. "Don't worry, little wolf. We'll find you some trees to frolic in."

"Actually, we have different biomes set up around the city for wolves who immigrate here from around the world. And at the palace we can turn your rooms into a miniature Moon Valley, if you like."

"Where is your palace?" I inquire with interest.

Gabriel gives me a wide smile and points at something through the center of the front windshield. "There."

I follow the direction of his finger, and feel my jaw drop in astonishment...

Chapter 152 – Check Up

I never imagined being in exile would look like this. King Gabriel's palace is the most extravagant display of luxury I've ever seen, and it's not as if I'm a stranger to mansions and palaces. That thought alone is enough to send me reeling... who would have ever dreamed that poor orphan Ella would end up rubbing elbows with the most important figures in the land, or have the social capital to become a political threat?

As we exit the cars and enter the building, I can only stare around myself in awe. The wealth here makes the wealth back on my home continent look like nothing, and the air seems to vibrate with the energy of the strange crystals which form the city. We get a brief tour of the palace, and then we're escorted up to a sprawling suite of rooms, even more expansive than the master suite in Sinclair's manor.

However the size of the space isn't what leaves me dumbstruck, it's the feeling that we're suddenly deep in the alpine forests of my home. The walls are all comprised of giant screens, each one displaying a live feed of some dense woodland – or so it seems. Even the ceiling displays a realistic view of the sky, a light dappled canopy which projects actual rays of sunlight down to the floor. Tucked in the farthest corner of the room is a large, round bed with sheer curtains around the edges. Blankets and pillows are waiting to be piled into a nest, and I feel as though I'm in one of my shared dreams with Sinclair.

His arms slide around my waist, and his lips graze my ear. "Do you like it?" All of a sudden I realize that he instructed the King to have our rooms prepared this way, to give me a safe space while we're in exile.

I can't help myself. I turn and climb into his arms, not satisfied with a simple hug and instead scrabbling up his huge body as if it were a tree. I wrap my arms and legs around my mate, rewarded with a low purr. "We're going to find a way back home, Ella. I promise."

"I know." I tell him honestly. "I trust you."

I realize that Gabriel has stepped outside, leaving us alone. I tilt my face up to Sinclair's, finding his gaze already on me. It's so intense, so heated, and I couldn't escape it even if I wanted to. He claims my lips in a deep kiss, and only the sound of a knock on the door tears us apart.

The doctor who enters is warm and gentle as he greets us, showing no small amount of sympathy for our plight. Still it takes quite a bit of cajoling to make me leave my mate's arms, and only concern for my baby convinces me to leave him. The physician takes my blood pressure and vitals, and sits patiently as we explain the story of my suppressed wolf and traumatic shift. Sinclair stays by my side throughout the examination, and when they wheel in an ultrasound machine and Rafe's tiny, three dimensional image appears

on the screen, I begin to cry for no other reason than how much I love him.

The physician then draws my blood, to the soundtrack of Sinclair's grumpy growls, and there's only one final set of tests to run when a guard sticks his head into the room. "Alpha, they've arrived."

Sinclair nods in acknowledgement, but I perk up with excitement. "Who's arrived?" I inquire eagerly. "Cora and Henry and Roger?"

"They'll still be here after your check up, trouble." Sinclair declares, massaging my nape.

"But I want to go see them." I insist, trying to squirm free of Sinclair's firm hold and the doctor's gloved fingers. "I have to make sure they're okay." Ever since my wolf woke up I've been feeling even more protective of my family than usual. Cora might trigger the strongest response, but my inner canine has also claimed Henry and Roger as part of her pack and there won't be any dissuading her.

Sinclair emits a warning growl, sending a shiver down my spine. His strong hands hold me in place, and I shoot him a sullen look as the doctor continues poking and prodding me. When I settle out of nothing more than sulky acknowledgement that I can't out-muscle these men, Sinclair leans down to kiss my cheek. I jerk away from him, baring my fangs with an insolent snarl, and Sinclair only arches a foreboding brow before claiming my mouth instead.

In my head I feel a wave of dominance, followed by the dark rumble of his wolf, behave, sweet mate.

Bite me. My own wolf replies, speaking before I have a chance to consider the wisdom of these words.

Gladly. Sinclair replies, nipping his claiming mark where my neck meets my shoulders. My wolf immediately lights up from the inside out, and the doctor gives us a quelling look. "I can't very well perform a cardiac stress test when you're making her heart race like that, Alpha."

"Don't look at me." Sinclair remarks, his eyes glowing. "She's the one challenging her mate." My little imp. He adds silently, for my benefit alone.

Rolling his eyes, the doctor finishes his tests, gradually rising to his feet as he puts up his equipment. "Well, I think you're safe to return to most of your normal activities, Ella." He instructs, holding up a staying hand when I immediately jump up with excitement. "I don't want you doing anything strenuous, especially not when you've been through so much, but I think waking your wolf has helped your condition. All that said, the first moment you start to feel faint, palpitations, spots in your vision or any of the other

symptoms you experienced when your original doctor gave this order, you need to contact me immediately.”

“Is there anything I can do to support her?” Sinclair asks, and I feel a silent wave of anxiety from his wolf.

“Just continue giving her wolf what she needs. Protect her, care for her, but don’t spoil her if she’s challenging you – the challenge is a sign she needs you to make her feel as if you have everything under control.” He advises.

“Thank you.” Sinclair professes, shaking his hand and escorting him out of the room.

I’m already out of bed and readjusting my clothes when he turns back, and I quickly bound over the floor. “Let’s go!” I demand.

Sinclair chuckles and hooks an arm around my body, slowing me down even when I grumble at the pace. Still, mere minutes later we’re in the entrance hall and my beautiful sister is running into my open arms, followed shortly by Roger and Henry. “Cora!” I exclaim, squeezing her tight. “How are you, are you okay?”

Cora is crying into my neck, her shoulders shaking beneath my hands. “I’m so glad you’re here.” She sniffles, letting me rock her back and forth. “This is all so crazy – one moment everything was fine and then... and then...why is this happening?”

“I know.” I croon, turning worried eyes to my mate. He’s greeting his family with hugs and hushed words, grim expressions on their faces. But Cora is still weeping and hiccuping, waiting for me to answer her. “I’m sorry, I never wanted you to get mixed up in all of this.”

“How long are we going to have to stay here?” She asks, reminding me so much of the little girl who used to crawl into my bed when she had a nightmare that my heart positively aches.

“I don’t know.” I confess, kissing her hair. “But it will be okay. I’m just so glad you’re here and your safe. Was it hard getting out of the city.”

Cora shakes her head, pulling away from me at last and wiping her eyes. “Roger came for me before the news even broke, but we weren’t sure if you got out until Dominic sent word. I was so afraid that you weren’t going to escape.”

I’m safe.” I assure her, framing her face in my hands. “We’re both safe. That’s all that matters.”

Even as I say the words I look back to Sinclair, who is once again shielding his feelings

from me. Despite what I tell my sister, I know I'm lying. Our safety isn't all that matters – because the millions of people we left behind are probably suffering untold terrors at this very moment. I can only imagine how heavy the burden Sinclair feels for being here when his pack remains under the Prince's thumb. At the same time, I feel how necessary our escape was. Sinclair can't help anyone if he's dead, and nor can I.

When he looks over at me, I can sense the anger, worry and fear rolling off of his body, even as he tries to shield me from it. I realize that while Sinclair might have been the one asking how to support me as a mother mere minutes ago, I have to do the same for him. My job is to support my mate in the darkest day of his career as Alpha, and though he might not want me to do so, I decide right then and there that I'm not going to give him a choice.

Chapter 153 – Late Night Comfort

Ella

“Won’t you come to bed?” I inquire, leaning over Sinclair’s back and wrapping my arms around his neck. ‘You need to rest.’”

My mate is sitting at his computer drafting emails and marching orders, secret correspondences to his allies and spies across the continent. He’s been trying to figure out some way to get a message to the people of the united packs, to let them know we’re alive and will not forsake them. So far the best plan we’ve come up with are for willing rebels to post bulletins and spray paint messages throughout the various cities, as well as antiauthoritarian propaganda. No one likes the idea of civilians endangering themselves in order to get the word out, but we don’t have much choice. This is a whole new world we’re living in.

“In a while.” Sinclair murmurs, rubbing his scruffy jaw against my cheek before turning to kiss me. My wolf is reaching out to his, trying to get a sense of his emotions, but she just keeps coming up against a brick wall.” You go get some sleep, baby.” “But I want to sleep with you.” I complain, not even caring that I’m whining. I know I can’t help Sinclair unless he lets me, and I’ll stoop to any low in order to convince him.

“I know, trouble. I’ll be there soon.” He replies, kissing me again. “I just want to finish a few things up first.”

I begrudgingly agree, and slink off towards the sumptuous bed – my new nest – and climb inside. It doesn’t feel right without my mate, and I realize that I associate Sinclair with safety the same way he does with me. Our wolves don’t feel content unless they’re together. I decide to try to call him to me in a dream, wondering if this will make him fall asleep. Instead I fall into a fitful spell of dreams searching for my mate, only to be let down when I cannot find him time after time.

Eventually I wake again, and as I blink my eyes open and reach for Sinclair, I realize I’m still alone in bed. I glance at the clock, seeing that it’s almost three in the morning – four hours since I went to bed. I climb out of my nest and groggily stumble towards the door.

As soon as it opens I hear the distant buzz of a video, though I’m not sure what’s happening in the feed. It sounds like scenes from a war zone, and I follow the sound with growing worry.

Sinclair is sitting on the couch with his laptop on the table before him, his attention focused entirely on the screen. I follow his gaze and see a very grainy video playing, of the Royal Army pouring through the streets of Moon Valley, forcing people out of their homes for interrogations and tests of allegiance to the former Prince... now Emperor. It doesn’t look like high quality news footage, and I slowly understand that this video has

been taken in secret. “What’s going on?” I murmur, rubbing my eyes.

“He’s shut down all the media outlets.” Sinclair responds, reaching out for me. I happily go to him, pouring myself into his lap and snuggling in. “He’s setting up his own state run news agency to spread his propaganda, and the people are risking their lives to get the word out.” As we watch, the shifter taking the video gets the attention of one of the soldiers, who storms over demanding to see what they’re filming. The soldier raises his fist and then the video turns to black and white static.

My stomach pitches and rolls as I realize the implications of this development. My wolf howls with the knowledge that these are members of our own pack, suffering terrible abuses and without anyone to protect them. I can only imagine how much worse this feels for my mate, even though he’s shielding me from actually feeling it.

“Please don’t shut me out, Dominic.” I beg, peering up at his stony face. “I know you’re hurting and I want to help. Don’t push me away.”

Sinclair purrs, dragging his lips over my brow. “I know you want to help, sweetheart. The problem is that there isn’t anything to be done. This isn’t going to get better until I find a way to make things right, and I’m afraid that won’t happen for some time.” “You can still talk to me, let me support you.” I encourage. “I’m your mate, that’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

Sinclair shakes his head with a low groan. “You’ve got enough to deal with, without me dumping my problems onto you as well.” “But your problems are my problems.” I argue. “We’re in this together.” “Trust me, Ella, I’m well aware of that.” I’m surprised by how harsh his tone becomes, even though it isn’t directed at me.

“What do you mean?” I inquire anxiously, not liking the dark note in his voice.

“I mean the only reason that you’re in this situation in the first place is my fault.” Sinclair growls. “If you’d never met me you could have had a normal life. A safe life.” “Dominic, if I’d never met you I would be back there.” I inform him sternly, pointing at the computer screen.

“I would be bankrupt, heartbroken, thinking I was barren, with a trapped wolf and nothing but an abusive employer and deadbeat ex-boyfriend – and that would have been before all this chaos happened. There’s no telling what might have happened if you hadn’t gotten me out.”

Sinclair winces, “you also wouldn’t have been kidnapped, blackmailed, attacked by rogues, or been forced to flee the only home you’ve ever known.” He counters severely, his jaw clenched with self-fury. “You wouldn’t have been in the position of having to choose between your life and our baby’s.”

I can't stand the way he's blaming himself for the Prince's crimes. "Listen to me." I demand sitting up and refusing to continue until he looks me in the eye. Because of you I am safe and loved, I'm about to fulfill my lifelong dream of becoming a mother.

You freed my wolf – opened my eyes to my true nature, gave me insights into my own past which I never knew existed before." I insist. "And I'll tell you something else. You didn't trick me into walking away from my old life. Your wolf, as irresistible as he is, didn't lure me away with promises of sunshine and rainbows. I convinced you to take me on, do you remember that? I started all this."

"And you had no idea what you were getting into." Sinclair replies coolly, echoing a sentiment he's made a few times before. "But I did. I was so determined to win the election that I took advantage of a desperate, innocent woman."

These words make me so angry that I wrench myself out of his lap and stand in front of him with my hands on my hips. "Shut up." I hiss angrily, surprising my mate with the force of the words.

He arches an ominous brow at me, "You might not like hearing it but "I said: Shut. Up." I repeat fiercely, ignoring the flash of his wolf in his eyes." I am not going to let you twist our past because you're feeling guilty about the coup. You weren't some ne'erdoowell who saw a damsel in distress and pounced at the opportunity to take advantage. I am not your victim, and do you know how I know that? Because I have been a victim before, I know what that feels like and it isn't this." I state, my voice strong and sharp.

"I went into this with my eyes wide open and maybe I didn't know all the implications, but you protected me every step of the way." I remind him." You loved me and cared for me from day one, and if I'd known then what I do now, I would gladly do it all over again.

I don't want Damon in power any more than you do and I would gladly sacrifice myself if it means protecting the millions he'll abuse in his reign." Sinclair's eyes glow as he looks up at me, an unreadable emotion in his eyes. "Are you finished?"

I cross my arms over my chest, 'That depends, are you going to keep being an unreasonable, block-headed, patronizing Before I can finish my list of choice words, Sinclair leans forward and presses his shoulder into my hips, gently tossing me over his shoulder. I squeak as he carts me off to the bedroom, slamming the laptop shut along the way.

The next thing I know I'm on my back in my nest, with my powerful mate looming above me. "You will not be sacrificing yourself for anyone." Sinclair rumbles, his voice gruff and gravelly. "Not for me, not your guards, not the whole kingdom." "That doesn't make sense, Dominic." I roll my eyes, "I'm not more important than all our people combined."

“When you were kidnapped and you gave yourself up for your guards, I told you that I was going to make sure you never did anything so reckless again,” He pauses, letting the memory sink in. “but I let you off the hook because of everything we went through afterwards... but maybe that was a mistake.”

He muses, hunger blazing to life in his eyes, the vibrations of his Alpha power sending shivers through my prone body. “From the sounds of it, you haven’t learned your lesson yet, mate.”

Chapter 154 – Ella’s Lesson

Sinclair

Ella is squirming beneath my towering form, and I can sense her wolf’s conflicted feelings. She’s pleased with herself for distracting me from my brooding thoughts, while also anxious about my intentions and excited by my dominance. She’s giving off waves of defiance and desire at once, and since the mischievous little wolf hasn’t yet learned how to censor the thoughts and feelings she sends to me, I suddenly hear her sweet voice in my head. Bossy Alpha. Trying to tell us what to do, as if it’s his choice and not ours.

Oh but it is my choice, mate. I reply, and Ella’s eyes go wide with shock, then accusation when she realizes what happened. You belong to me, and that means I get to decide whether or not you throw your precious life away for someone else.

You shouldn’t be listening to my thoughts when you know I can’t control them. She tells me indignantly.

If you don’t want to get in trouble for them, then you shouldn’t be thinking such naughty things. I reply, climbing onto the bed and looming over her on all fours. Besides, I think maybe you wanted me to hear that. You haven’t been projecting all your other thoughts towards me, only that last one.

Why would I intentionally provoke you? She huffs, and the beautiful creature beneath me tilts her head and exposes her neck to me, rubbing and writhing deeper into the thick bedding. She may not understand what she’s doing, but her instincts are driving her to put on a show for me, entice me with her would-be submission.

Very alluring, I praise her wolf, a deep chuckle rolling through my chest like thunder. My adorable mate preens, and I can sense Ella’s confusion at her own response. But if you didn’t want to provoke me then you wouldn’t have been telling me to shut up and rolling your gorgeous eyes at me either. I lower myself between her legs, stroking her silky thigh with my free hand.

I don’t know what you’re talking about. Her wolf insists, turning her snout up.

Well it doesn’t really matter if you intended it or not, the end result is the same, trouble. I declare, dipping my head to nibble the lovely offering of her neck. Ella is trembling with anticipation and barely contained lust, the scent of her arousal floats up to me, reassuring me that I’m not pushing her too far after so much excitement. Granted, I was hardly gentle when I claimed her the first time after she shifted, but that was before our entire world came crashing down.

Ella moans as my teeth nip her sensitive skin, arching her back and sliding her arms

around my back. You might be a tyrant, but you certainly know how to make me feel good. She confesses. I'll never get tired of this.

Oh baby, you don't even know what this is, yet. I reply, shifting off of her. I lean back against the stacked pillow of Ella's nest, then pull her over my lap, moving so quickly that she can't keep up. She gasps with surprise when she finds herself face down with her luscious bottom on display, then quickly tries to squirm free. "Uh-uh trouble, you're not going anywhere." I tell her sternly, keeping one hand on the small of her back, while the other caresses the curve of her lovely backside.

"The first time we did this it was to help you break the dam on your feelings. The second time was just for fun." I remind her, images of our delirious first night together filling my head. "But now I'm going to give you a taste of what will happen if you ever recklessly endanger yourself again, whether you have noble reasons or not."

"Dominic, please don't." She requests, batting her long lashes at me. However at the same time her wolf growls at me in challenge, belying Ella's sweet plea. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"Oh I beg to differ." I rumble, massaging the perky globes beneath my fingers. "Your job is to protect yourself and our pup at all costs. The guards I assigned to you were more than willing to give their lives for you, and your death would only have made theirs in vain. That isn't what anyone would have wanted."

"But-" She protests, wriggling in a way that sends blood straight to my cock.

"And that's nothing to mention the way you disobeyed me today by getting off the plane before it was safe, arguing with me about seeing the doctor, or the way you challenged me tonight." I shake my head. "In fact, the more I think about it, the more I realize I've been going easy on you for too long. You've been pushing your limits with me more and more since your wolf woke, and I haven't been giving her what she needs, have I?" I inquire, still warming the fleshy canvas soon to suffer my itching palm's punishment.

Ella looks up at me with wide eyes, "I'm sorry, I promise I'll be good!"

However her wolf has other thoughts about this. Speak for yourself, why should we follow his rules if he's not even going to enforce them.

Would you shut up! Ella tells her wolf, either not realizing or not caring that I can hear this too. You're only making things worse.

The saucy canine shrugs with disinterest, and I know my instincts were right. Her wolf needs this as badly as my own. "Mmm, I think we might have to make this a nightly routine." I suggest, mostly joking because I want to see her reaction. "With such a

naughty wolf at the helm, you're going to need all the correction I can provide."

Ella's jaw drops, but her thighs clench together, trying to ease the ache at their center. You wouldn't dare!

"Mm-hmm." I observe, slipping up her night dress and slowly pulling down her panties. When I see the pool of wetness soaking the cloth, I purr with satisfaction. "I can see how distasteful you find this idea."

When her own scent reaches her nose, Ella presses her hands over her blushing face. "You shouldn't tease me! I don't even know what's happening to me."

"It's okay baby, because I do." I promise, raising my hand to deliver the first of many swats. 'This is the way of wolves, it's only natural that you crave it.'

Ella jerks and cries out when the first spank lands, but her arousal spikes with her adrenaline as if the two are tethered. By the tenth spank she's begging me for mercy, with the twentieth she's lashing out and calling me names, fighting like a hellcat. By the thirtieth she slumps over my legs, crying pitifully even as the well of shared desire between us is all but overflowing.

When it's over I slip my hand between her legs, my fingers sinking into her wetness. I can't help but bring my fingers to my lips and suck her sweet honey from the digits. "Such a delicious, mate." My wolf croons, hovering at the surface of my skin. Ella moans with embarrassment but rocks her hips into my hand as my fingers return to her center. It barely takes anything to make her come, she's already so turned on. "Good girl." I praise her, continuing to stroke her tight sheath as she comes down from her high. 'Think you can take some more?'

Ella shudders and nods, and I slide my legs out from under her. I move behind her and pull her up onto her knees. I free my hard member and drive myself to the hilt in my mate with a single thrust, making her cry out with the sensation of being so deeply impaled at the same time as my hips collide with her red bottom.

I take her fast and hard, eventually pulling her back up to my chest so that I strum her clit and sink my fangs into my mark as we both cry out in ecstasy. I spill myself into her body, as she clenches and clamps around me, tears streaming down her cheeks at the overwhelming sensations.

Afterwards, when her tiny body is tucked against mine and my hand rests on her pregnant belly, our son rolls around in her womb, pressing his hands and feet against the wall of her uterus in ways that make her gasp and murmur with something between surprise and discomfort. I suppose he was roused by our activity, but when I reach through the bond all I sense from the pup is tranquility. He likes it when his Mommy is so

euphoric and content, and he likes feeling my touch.

I know Ella can feel it too, and as she regains the ability to speak, she turns her head over her shoulder. She grins up at me, overflowing with love and triumph. "I knew I could get you to come to bed."

"Oh," I beam in return. "Is that what this was? Did you pull one over on me, trouble?" I tease, tapping her red bottom.

Ella hisses and pulls away, her cheeks flushing crimson. "Well, not the way I planned to." She admits sheepishly. "But it worked all the same."

"Such a clever, sly little mate." I praise her, knowing that while she may not have been expecting this particular outcome, but appreciating that she's right. If she hadn't come to get me I would still be sitting out in the living area watching that horrible footage. I need my rest to win this war, and my beloved Ella found a way to make sure I got some sleep. My last thought before I fall asleep – is how lost I would be without her, and how fucking grateful I am that I don't ever have to be without her again.

Chapter 155 – The Vanaran Capital

Ella

When I walk into breakfast the next morning, I have to try and hide my wince as I sit down. My bottom is sore and stings when it meets the chair, but the bite of pain also sends a pulse of heat through my body, calling up the memories of what came next.

I feel my mate's eyes on me, and when I look up, Sinclair is watching me with a knowing smirk. He looks so wolfish in this moment that I find myself wondering how I ever thought he was anything but a ruthless predator. Is there a problem, trouble? He asks in my head.

I don't know what you're talking about. I sniff, turning my nose up at him.

This earns only a smug chuckle in reply, and I have to fight to hide my blush. "Well you two certainly found each other." The king observes warmly. "You'd think there wasn't anyone else in the room."

Feeling a spark of inspiration, I jolt, "Oh, your majesty, when did you get here?" The entire table laughs, and Sinclair slides his hand onto my thigh, sending zings of pure affection through our bond.

"Please call me Gabriel, Ella. There are no formalities in my household." The King replies, smiling widely. "How did you sleep last night?"

"Very well." I answer happily, and the steady weight of Sinclair's hand shifts as his fingers begin to trace circles on my inner thigh.

As we continue making small talk he slides his hands even higher, slipping right up my skirt between my legs. No one would ever know from looking at him that he's doing anything under the table, but he can barely smother his hungry growl when he realizes I'm not wearing panties. Going commando, you bad girl?

I didn't intend to, but when I tried putting on my panties the fabric just irritated my... skin. It's a struggle even to get the words out. I can feel my skin heating with excitement and embarrassment, shocked by my own daring. I can't believe he's touching me this way with so many people around us, when we could be discovered at any moment.

Oh come on, Sinclair teases, circling my clit. You can do better than that.

My heart rate is increasing, and I'm sure the others can hear it, surely Sinclair isn't going to actually continue this teasing. If it goes on much longer everyone will be able to smell my desire. Before I can think to reply, the King speaks again, pulling our attention away from one another. "I do hope you'll join our tour of the city today, now that you're off bed

rest.”

“I can’t wait.” I answer honestly. I’d been jealous when he first offered to take our group around today and show us the capital, assuming that I wouldn’t be able to join. Now I can’t wait. After everything we’ve been through, we could use some normalcy – even if it’s only for a day.

“You’ll have to take notes of your favorite things so you can tell me all about them later.” He tells me, and I blink in surprise.

“You mean you aren’t coming?” I clarify, my wolf whining with unhappiness. He sends back a silent purr, and I lash out at the comforting sound.

“I wish I could, sweetheart.” Sinclair frowns. “But I have too much work to do. The news last night... things are even worse than I feared.”

“I know everything is terrible, Dominic. I was just excited to spend the day with you.” I reply, giving him my best puppy dog eyes. “When was the last time we got to be out together without the campaign looming over us, have we ever?”

Sinclair’s wolf groans in my head. “Don’t give me that look, baby. I can’t stand it.” His hand goes still, retreating from my intimate flesh to rest on my thigh. “Every minute counts here. Every second we waste is another moment the people in the united pack suffer. Mere minutes could be the difference between life and death for too many to count.”

“But you can’t help them if you burn out, Dominic.” I argue, recalling the wave of appreciation he’d sent to me last night just before we fell asleep. I’m fully embracing my duty to help my mate decompress and find small ways to feel in control amidst chaos.

“Your mate is right, Dorn.” Gabriel echoes, “You all have been through far too much. You need to take a breather so that you can come back for your people stronger than ever.”

Sinclair looks as though he doesn’t like this idea one bit. His face closes off, and I can feel his stubborn wolf digging in his heels. “I appreciate what you’re both saying, and I can even acknowledge that there’s some truth in it. But being able to disconnect is a privilege the Moon Valley wolves simply don’t have right now, and I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I did when they need me most.”

“Son, you should listen to your mate.” Henry sighs. “At the rate your going you’ll run yourself into the ground before the week is out.”

Sinclair only frowns deeper, and his hands close into fists. “I appreciate your concern but-”

"If you appreciate our concern then listen, Dorn." Roger interjects.

I can feel his frustration rising, and the higher and higher it builds, the more uneasy I become. Sinclair abruptly slams one of his fists on the table before opening and closing his mouth. In the end he pushes away from the table and storms out without another word. I know he doesn't have his wolf in control and he's leaving to avoid lashing out, but I follow him anyway.

"Ella let him go," Hugo advises, "He needs to work through this alone."

I pause in the doorway, looking back at my father in law. "I have to." I shrug, before stalking after my mate.

I find him in our suite, pacing back and forth, breath heaving. I suspect he wants to shift, he came up to our forest sanctuary to try and satisfy his inner animal, so that he wouldn't be forced to take off on a time consuming run. He looks up when I enter, "You don't want to be around me right now, little wolf."

"Yes I do." I reply, swaying my hips as I glide forward. "I always want to be around you."

"This isn't a game, Ella." Sinclair growls. "I'm this close to losing it." He shares, holding his finger and thumb an imperceptible distance from one another.

"So lose it." I order. "How many times have I lost it around you?"

"That's different." My mate grumbles, "you losing it isn't a threat to me."

"You won't hurt me." I say confidently, moving closer even as he scowls at me. "I can feel your love for me too strongly and I'm not made of glass."

Sinclair huffs, "I know that, but-"

"Lose it." I press, putting some force behind the words now. "Tell me what you're thinking."

I can see it the moment he snaps, the moment his resolve gives way. He snarls and glares at me as the words are wrenched from his lips. "I'm thinking that it's easy for Gabriel and my father and brother to sit there and tell me what to do, when they're not the ones who are responsible for a pack in crisis. I'm thinking that you shouldn't be worrying about me and the fact that you are means I'm failing you! I hate that I can't spend time with you when we're so newly mated, that I'm missing out on seeing you create a miracle." He continues, gesturing to my midsection.

Sinclair continues to vent, getting louder and louder with every word. "I hate everything that led us to this place. I hate having to sit by and do nothing, because war takes time. I'm thinking I should have stayed and fought, even if there was no chance of winning. I'm thinking I'm a traitor for abandoning my people." He pauses, looking so feral I honestly feel a little afraid. "And I'm thinking that if Damon were in front of me now I would rip off his manhood, then rip off his fingers and toes one at a time. And I'd keep going that way until he was just a headless torso, but I'd keep him alive for as long as possible to maximize his suffering."

He throws the last words out in a fit of rage, and after he just glowers at me, heaving in ragged breaths of air. Sinclair's heartbeat is pounding and I can feel his wolf's erratic energy, his worry about frightening me. At the same time, I can feel the tension draining out of him like a valve just opened and sucked out all the toxic energy from his veins. He's watching me closely, waiting for a response, and I slowly approach him. "Feel better?" I ask, knowing very well how cathartic it can be to simply shout your grievances to the heavens, even if nothing comes of it.

Sinclair shakes his head and offers me an exasperated laugh. "Yes, you impossible thing," He confesses, dragging one powerful hand through his hair. His entire mood transforms before my eyes, "I do, are you happy?"

"I'm happy if you're happy." I murmur, sliding closer and wrapping my arms around him, "You aren't failing me. But if you don't give yourself a break, then you're going to end up failing the very people you're fighting for." I profess, and just in case, I add. "Besides, are you really going to let your breeding mate wander around a strange city without you? Who knows what terrible things might happen to me."

Sinclair chuckles and claims my lips, "Alright trouble, you win – just this once."

Chapter 156 – Sightseeing

The Vanaran capital feels like a different planet. Everywhere we look crystals tower over us, carved into the most intricate forms I've ever seen.

The shifters populating the city are friendly and open in their curiosity, and we frequently stop so Gabriel can chat with the locals and introduce us.

It's all so easy and peaceful, no lies, no secrets, just wolves living openly together in harmony. Watching Gabriel, I see a leader who is strong but compassionate, ruthless but open-minded.

He's intelligent and has as much raw power as my own mate, though he lacks Sinclair's dangerous edge. I expect Gabriel would be quite deadly if pushed, but he's much more easy going than my own brooding Alpha.

Then again, he's not the one exiled and preoccupied with planning a revolution. Still, for a moment I envision a future world where Sinclair is the King of the united packs, and Damon's regime is a long-forgotten nightmare.

In my heart I know this is the kind of society my mate could create as leader; Gabriel's utopian world could be our own, if only we could take back our home.

Maybe it's naive to think a traumatized society could recover completely and achieve this sort of easy comfort...After all it's not like Sinclair could simply snap his fingers and undo all the suffering caused by his predecessor.

No, if we can win this war we'll have a monumental task ahead of us in terms of healing and rebuilding the united packs, and earning the trust of an oppressed people.

But I believe that if anyone can achieve this goal, it's Sinclair. I turn to look up at the man in question, so inspired by this vision that I want to share my hope with him.

However when I see his face he looks a million miles away. His granite jaw is clenched and his gaze is hawkishly scanning our surroundings.

He manages to smile and greet the various people we meet, but his grip on my waist never loosens, and he never loses the hardness in his eyes.

I lean into his side as a cool breeze flutters through the square, carrying the scent of rain. "What good is coming out if you're not going to actually be present?"

I inquire, poking his muscular chest. The huge Alpha looks down at me with dry amusement, closing his powerful hand around my offending finger.

“I said I would come along, I didn’t promise to forget my worries.” “That’s cheating.” I inform him, narrowing my eyes to a scowl. “Is it now?”

He asks, arching his brow in response to my accusation. “Need I remind you that you’re the one who pointed out how dangerous unfamiliar territories can be? Especially for mischievous little wolves too clever and too brave for their own good.”

“You agreed to take a break.” I counter, ignoring the bait he put out for my wolf, and laying a bit of my own. “And if you get to break your promises then I don’t see why I should have to keep my own.”

I know he doesn’t need more explanation. Before we left Gabriel’s palace Dominic made me vow to stay close to him, never go out of sight and tell him the moment I sensed anything off.

I knew he was just being cautious — and rightly so after everything we’ve been through, but now those same promises are providing me with the perfect button to push.

Sinclair growls, his wolf is naturally responding to my own, and in an instant I realize that the best way to get my mate out of his shell, is to do it literally.

“Ella—”

Sinclair warns, using my name as if it’s an admonishment. “We should shift.” I suggest, cutting him off. “Half the people here are in their wolf form.” I say, gesturing to the people cowering around us.

It’s true, it seems the Vanarans are so comfortable and secure in their secret lands that they feel no danger shifting in public, let alone in broad daylight. “Your wolf is too inexperienced to be around so many strangers.” Sinclair cautions, shaking his head.

“It’s not a good idea.”

My wolf doesn’t care for this one bit. Now that I’ve made shifting a possibility, she’s clawing at my skin, begging to get out.

Yes, yes, yes! Freedom! Sinclair grips my nape, I said no, mate. Too late! My wolf sings defiantly, and my body shudders as the painful shift begins.

Cursing, Sinclair shields me as I tremble, jerk and whimper through the next few minutes.

It’s over quickly, and soon I’m sitting in front of him as my wolf, my dress in tatters on the ground.

I wag my tail as I look up at my mate, who stands there with his arms crossed over his chest, disapproval rolling off of him in waves.

I jump up and brace my paws on his rock-hard abs, wishing I was tall enough to lick the frown right off his face.

Instead I swipe my tongue over his neck and nuzzle his chest with my snout, Come on, Dominic.

Come play with me! I beg, Please, please, please.

I am not amused by this, Ella.

His grumpy voice sounds in my mind.

Ignoring him, I jump down and bound around his legs, nudging him and repeating my pleading over and over.

It's around the time that I nip his ankles that the stoic Alpha finally caves, his massive wolf bursting free with a roar.

My wolf is in charge, and she only wants to celebrate.

Yay!!! She cries, pouncing on him the moment the shift is complete.

Sinclair's foreboding energy is tinged with humor now, and I know I've won.

We wrestle and play for a moment before he pins me beneath him, plopping his heavy body down on mine so that I'm completely trapped.

Is this what you wanted, trouble? He teases, mouthing my neck affectionately.

No, I want to run! I whine, squirming under him but finding myself stuck.

Hmm, I don't know.

I kind of like having you right here, your little paws in the air, completely at my mercy.

He informs me huskily.

Your mercy to do what? Suffocate me? I complain, trying to dislodge his enormous form.

How can anyone be this heavy? Sinclair doesn't budge one bit from my efforts, but he

does release my neck and shift his weight so he can investigate my belly with his nose.

Look at this tummy.

He croons, ignoring my outraged question and burying his snout in the downy white fur.

So soft, so precious.

Despite myself, the baby sends something that feels like laughter to us both, and I melt, wanting more of this.

I suppose now that Sinclair is out of his head and in a playful mood I shouldn't mind that he's lying on my like a living wolf rug. I should just let my mate enjoy himself at my own expense...at least, the human part of my brain can acknowledge this.

My wolf on the other hand, she's still dying to run.

Dominic come on, let me up! She moans.

I want to play.

We are playing.

He replies slyly.

This is a game I like to call pin the naughty mate. Don't you like it? No! I respond indignantly.

"You two do realize we're in the middle of the street, right?"

Roger observes, appearing in my periphery and interrupting my outraged reply.

Don't look at me.

Sinclair says to us both. She started it.

Dominic, it's not fair! I've barely ever shifted, I just want to run around a little! I say, trying to sound pitiful.

Can't you feel how much I need it? The black beast stares down at me with glowing eyes, and I can feel him reaching through the bond to sense my emotions.

His sharp eyes soften then, and he swipes a few licks over my face.

Alright trouble, but you're going to stay with me, right? He questions, rising off of me so I can regain my feet.

That depends.

I hedge, feeling a rush of excitement as a new idea strikes me.

I dance away from my mate and his brother, unsurprised when the former prowls after me with a hungry look in his eyes.

Depends on what? Sinclair inquires, his voice dark and deep.

On whether you can keep up! I take off before the words are even out of my mouth, and Sinclair immediately gives chase, responding to my challenge out of instinct rather than thought.

I can't contain a gleeful giggle as I take off through the streets, and though Sinclair catches up to me quickly, he doesn't pounce again He runs alongside me, even when I playfully bump into his side to try and throw him off course.

He simply nips at my heels and spurs me to run faster.

I feel like a child again, so utterly free that I might as well be flying.

When I reach out to sense my mate's feelings, I find his heart and mind open for once, completely consumed by this moment.

He's not thinking of anything else but this moment, and pride fills me for a job well done. Maybe I can do this Luna thing after all

Chapter 157 – Cora Confides in Roger

Cora Confides in Roger

3rd Person

As Sinclair and Ella raced away through the winding streets of the Vanaran capital, Roger found his gaze lingering on Cora. The human was staring after her sister in amazement, as if she couldn't believe her own eyes. The wind fluttered through her black hair, carrying her now-familiar scent to the rugged wolf.

Roger had been sticking close to Cora ever since they fled Moon Valley. When he first turned up on her doorstep telling her they had to flee the territory, she'd been too stunned to respond. He'd ended up packing a bag for her while she looked on in shocked silence, only speaking in response to direct questions. In the car he and Henry had explained the situation to her in as much depth as they could manage, but he could feel her fear as if it was his own. It called to his protective instincts, and he felt a strange affinity for this woman – like him, she was watching her younger sibling take the world by storm, and though she never expressed any dissatisfaction with her lot in life, Roger did wonder.

Moving beside her, Roger watched as the frolicking pair became no more than tiny dots in the distance, "Amazing, isn't it?" He remarked, startling the preoccupied woman. "A month ago we didn't even think she had a wolf – and now this."

Cora shook her head, "I can't even wrap my head around it. I've known Ella my whole life... and she's always been different, but I thought that was just... Ella being Ella."

"What do you mean?" Roger inquired curious now.

Her mouth stretches into a wry smile. "I don't need to tell you what it's like growing up in someone's shadow." She murmured after a thoughtful beat. "And don't get me wrong, Ella made incredible sacrifices for me, she cared for me through thick and thin. But I'd be lying if I said I never resented her for being so much better at everything, for being strong or brave enough to face the things I couldn't." Cora paused, clamping her eyes shut for a moment with obvious regret. "I'm not proud of it but sometimes I even blamed her for protecting me rather than letting me suffer – how's that for ungrateful?"

Roger shrugged. "It's natural to want to fight your own battles." He empathized, catching her gaze, "and just because you aren't proud of a feeling doesn't make it invalid."

Cora's eyes widened slightly as Roger's eyes bored into her own, and she felt a slight flutter of excitement in her tummy. When had anyone ever watched her so intently? As if they were looking straight through her to the very core of her being? Roger's wolf perked up when he sensed a spark of interest in Cora's chocolate eyes, and he shifted closer as

she forged on. "Well either way it makes sense now." She continued. "Why Ella always seemed to draw people to her like a magnet, why she was always the smartest, strongest and fastest even though she's the size of a doll."

"I get that." Roger nodded, looking after Sinclair and Ella one more time before turning away and encouraging Cora to do the same. "But making sense doesn't make seeing it any less surreal."

"You can say that again." Cora chuckled, wondering why she'd followed the man's movements so naturally. "And the funny thing is that the wolf isn't even the strangest part – it's how different she is with Dominic."

"How so?" Roger asked, leading Cora towards an ice cream parlor with a firm hand on the small of her back.

"In the best way." Cora smiled, though it didn't entirely reach her eyes. Roger didn't know Ella and Cora's full story, but he knew enough to realize there were some skeletons in their closets. He was sure he was seeing some now, some past darkness that hung over the sisters even in their happiest moments. "I always knew our lives... the way we grew up... took a toll on Ella, but she's always kept it bottled up. She's never trusted anyone enough to rely on them and she's never known how to open up or be vulnerable."

As they stepped into the shop, Roger processed this information with dawning understanding. If there was one thing he knew about his baby brother, it's that Sinclair would never stand for his mate keeping him at a distance or facing her troubles alone. "I knew all that, but I didn't realize how it weighed her down... trapped her. The Ella I grew up with wasn't playful or free-spirited. She was brave, defiant and darkly funny at times, but this Ella? The one who throws off her humanity in the street and goes running off into the sunset to play, even though the world around us is on fire?" Cora shakes her head. "No one deserves such happiness more than Ella, and I hate that I've never seen this side of her before now."

They hovered in the doorway of the parlor, and Roger studied Cora closely, trying to read between the lines of her words. "Do you feel guilty? That you weren't able to bring out this side of her?"

Cora huffed a sardonic laugh. "I feel guilty for a lot of things," she confessed ominously. "But not this. She needed to find her mate in order to feel safe coming out of her shell. That's not something I was ever going to be able to do for her."

"And you?" Roger asked slyly, guiding her to the service counter. "What would it take to make you come out of your shell?"

Cora blinked at him in surprise. "What makes you think I haven't already?"

Roger chuckled, taking notice when Cora blushed bright pink at the sound. "A lifetime of experience." He finally answered vaguely.

"Well it's not exactly easy." Cora hedged. "I'm on the run in a country I didn't even know existed until yesterday."

Roger flashed his fangs, "So? That's not stopping your sister."

"My sister is drunk on love." Cora reminded him. "Dreams she never even knew she had are coming true left and right."

"And your dreams?" Roger pressed, his demeanor growing more and more predatory by the moment. He wasn't sure what it was about this human, but the more she spoke the more intriguing he found her. The more he wanted to push her buttons, just to see how she'd react.

"What can I get you?" The teenager behind the ice cream counter was smiling at them, completely oblivious that he was interrupting a conversation Roger was finding increasingly fascinating. Cora, on the other hand, was more than happy to jump at the distraction. They ordered, and Roger followed Cora to a table out front, keeping his father and Gabriel in his periphery. The old Alpha and the King were in deep conversation, and though Roger felt he might be slacking off his pack duties, he simply couldn't drag his wolf's focus from the human.

"So what do you think of all this?" Cora asked when he sat down, gesturing to the glittering city surrounding them.

Roger chuckled, "You can't throw me off the scent that easily, Cora." He liked the feel of her name on his tongue, and he rolled it this way and that – almost experimentally – before finally releasing the final syllable. The sound seemed to surprise Cora too, who smothered a shiver.

"I don't know what you mean." Cora lied, earning a low rumble from the wolf seated across her. Her jaw dropped in outrage. "Are you growling at me?"

"That's what happens when people lie to me." Roger informed her coolly, arching a brow.

"Oh like you're so perfect?" Cora accused, crossing her arms over her chest. "I know you were working with the Prince against your own family. You expect me to believe you never lied to further your political games."

“And now you’re shifting the focus onto me,” He observed. “I won’t deny the wrongs of my past, but if you expect me to talk about them then I expect your honesty in exchange.”

Cora, thoroughly frazzled and both affronted and excited by the shifter’s behavior, pushed back from her chair. “Look I don’t know why you think you have the right to speak to me this way, but as far as I’m concerned, I don’t owe you anything – least of all my honesty.”

“No? I did save your life just a few days ago.” Roger reminded her, a spark of mischief in his dark eyes.

“Only because Dominic asked you to.” Cora argued, “don’t pretend you would have thought about me otherwise.”

Roger dipped his head in acknowledgement. “You may have a point.” He acceded, but as he continued his eyes flashed with his wolf “but make no mistake, little human, that’s the last time I’ll ever fail to think of you again.”

Cora, unsure what to do or how to interpret this, turned on her heel, and fled.

Chapter 158 – Refugees

Ella

“What do you mean, you lost my sister?” I demand, baring my fangs at Roger. Sinclair is holding me by the waist, preventing me from lunging at his brother the way my wolf is currently demanding.

Roger held his hands up in defense. “She’s probably back at the palace. We were talking and she got annoyed with me and left.”

“Then why didn’t you follow her? She is the only human on an entire continent of wolves, and you just let her run off on her own?” I hiss, lashing out with my claws. Sinclair purrs and takes a step back, causing my hands to swipe through nothing but air. “She doesn’t know her way around or have any contacts here!”

“You ought to give her more credit. She’s a big girl, Ella.” Roger tells me, with infuriating confidence. “She’s also known about and been working with shifters a lot longer than you have. She’s used to being the only human in the room.”

“How dare you tell me how to feel or think about my sister. She is my sister, not yours. You don’t know the first thing about her.” I accuse, getting more annoyed by the minute. “Why I oughta—”

“Alright trouble, why don’t we go back to the palace and make sure Cora is home safe. If she isn’t we can go out looking, and I’ll even let you beat up Roger. How does that sound?” Sinclair suggests, his lips moving against my ear.

“I heard that.” Roger informs us, thoroughly exasperated.

“Can I still beat him up, even if she is back at the palace?” I inquire, batting my eyelashes at my mate and ignoring the impudent wolf in front of us.

“Hmm, I’ll think about it.” Sinclair promises, kissing my upturned lips. Besides, Cora isn’t the only one who ran off into the unknown today. I think maybe you’ve been a bad influence on her. He adds in my head, his voice more than a little sultry.

My jaw drops at this accusation as I turn to face him. He immediately pulls me close, even as I protest. That isn’t fair! I haven’t learned to control my wolf yet.

Sinclair’s dark chuckle rolls through my mind, don’t pretend like it was an accident, little mate. I know you too well.

Big bully. I accuse, nibbling his pec and delivering a particularly sharp nip when his emerald eyes meet mine.

I know I'm pushing my luck, and I don't care. After so much running, playing and flirting, we both need a release. As soon as we locate Cora I fully expect Sinclair to close us in our suite and not emerge until morning. I'm eager and ready for him already, and the knowledge that our love making will keep his mind off the war is only a bonus. Making Sinclair take a day off requires constant and continuous effort – and I'm more than happy to let my body pay the toll.

Luckily Cora is waiting at the Palace when we return, though she won't tell me about what happened with Roger no matter how many times I ask. Eventually Sinclair drags me away and, thanks to his ravenous wolf, I soon forget my anger with his brother. In fact, he works me over so well that I can barely remember my own name by the time we're done. I can only lay sprawled over his chest, near comatose as he strokes my spine and whispers sweet nothings in my ear – some more scandalous than others.

My eyelids grow heavy, and I try to push myself up, painfully aware that if I fall asleep Sinclair will probably go back to work. Sinclair's arm locks around me, and I whine with annoyance. "Let me up, Dominic."

"You were projecting your thoughts again, trouble." Sinclair informs me, encouraging me to settle. "You need your rest and you're not going to lose it for my sake."

Damned bond. I think bitterly, and his growly laugh wraps around me like the coziest blanket. "Will you at least nap with me?" I request, too exhausted to argue, let alone actually move. If I were as enormous as my mate then lying on top of him might just trap him in bed, but I know that's not the case. Instead I have to hope that I can snuggle in so completely that he won't want to risk waking me by moving.

Such a mischievous little wolf. Sinclair teases, nothing but praise in his deep voice. I'll rest for a while, but I can't promise I'll stay for the whole nap.

Realizing this is the best deal I can probably hope for, I surrender, falling asleep to the sound of my mate's purrs.

When I wake my body is sated and sore, but I'm alone in bed. I glance at the clock and realize I napped most of the afternoon. Even so, I know I'll probably crash again in a few hours. I rub my baby bump with a sigh. "I love you, angel. But these constant naps of yours do get in the way of Mommy's diabolical plans."

Oh sure, blame the pup. My wolf jokes, Never mind the Alpha who pleasures you into a coma every few hours.

She has a point. If I didn't know any better I might think Sinclair was using sex to exhaust me, but this is the way it's always been with his wolf. He never seems to get

enough of me, and I know he wouldn't turn his attention from the war at all if he could help it. This is pure instinct, and I'm not complaining one bit.

I pull on a robe and wander into the other room, where I can hear my mate talking with Hugo, Henry, Roger and Gabriel. Sinclair's eyes lock onto me the moment I walk in the room, following my movements with total focus. I yawn and stretch as I approach, unwittingly emitting a sleepy moan, and I see Sinclair's pupils expand with desire. You're playing a dangerous game to tempt me in front of all of these wolves, sweet mate. Flaunting your delectable curves, those sexy little sounds. His wolf is clearly taking over, and I feel a rush of pride that I can affect him this way.

I'm just stretching. My wolf mutters back honestly, as I crawl into Sinclair's lap. He welcomes me with open arms, wrapping me in a tight embrace and kissing me hello— as if we're the only ones in the room. I can feel his hardness digging into my bottom, which still stings from my earlier discipline – but it's a delightful ache that sends pulses of heat straight to my core. If we're not careful the entire room might soon know just how out of control our libidos have become since we mated. It might not surprise or bother them, but I still have enough human hang ups to try and avoid it at all costs.

Luckily, Sinclair doesn't seem any more interested in putting on a show than I am. How was your nap? Sinclair inquires, changing the subject.

Lonely. I complain. I fell asleep all warm and safe and satisfied, and then I woke up cold and alone.

Poor baby. Sinclair croons, caressing my round belly. You know I would have liked nothing more than to stay and snuggle with you.

But more important things came up? I sniff, playing up my pitiful tone.

Nothing is more important to me than you and Rafe. Sinclair rumbles fiercely, softening his tone as he reluctantly continues. But there were more pressing things, yes.

I'm not sure how to respond. Of course I know that the war is more pressing than anything else, and it's not that I'm not heartbroken or worried. I was just so pleased that I'd been able to convince Sinclair to give himself a break,

"Sweetheart." He says aloud, pulling my attention from my thoughts. "Refugees from the continent started arriving in Vanara today. Gabriel is working on setting up shelters, but things are escalating quickly. We've been discussing plans for me to travel north and meet with the other rulers here... to start trying to build alliances and pool resources."

"Oh." I murmur softly, "are the other rulers here likely to be sympathetic to our cause?"

Gabriel speaks first. "I think they will. The noble ones will want to help their fellow wolves. The selfish will fear Damon getting powerful enough to try and expand his empire here into Vanara, or at least worry about the strain of taking in a continent's worth of refugees. I think there's a very strong chance you'll be able to garner the backing you require."

"That's good." I assess, yawning again. "So when do we leave?"

Sinclair's mouth tightens, and one by one the other men rise from the table and leave the room. I know this isn't a good sign, but I don't want to contemplate what it might mean. Of course, that knowledge can't be avoided. Sinclair cups my face in his huge palm, stroking my cheek with the pad of his thumb. "Ella, it's clear I have to go... but I'm not sure if I can take you with me."

Chapter 159 – Separation

Separation

Ella

“What do you mean, you might not take me with you?” I demand, barely processing Sinclair’s words. “We’re mated, where you go I go.”

“Baby, I don’t want to be away from you.” Sinclair sighs, sending a wave of genuine regret through our bond. This isn’t the first time he’s done this – let me feel his emotions to confirm their veracity, but this is the strongest I’ve ever experienced them. With the help of our connection, I can sense how terribly Sinclair hates the idea of leaving me behind when he travels. It’s making his wolf positively rabid with anger, worry, and sadness. Even as the emotions are filtering in, I can already see a way to use them to my advantage. If he feels this strongly, surely it won’t be too difficult to convince him to take me with him.

“The problem is that I have no idea what I’m walking into with a lot of these meetings.” Sinclair explains. “I’ve been to Vanara before, and know a few of the Alphas, but most of the packs I’m visiting are complete unknowns. I don’t know the territories or threats, I don’t know how rough the conditions will be or how well we’ll be received when we arrive.”

“How much time are we talking about?” I question, needing to get a handle on the scope of this potential separation.

“Weeks, maybe a month.” He shakes his head, and I can feel his frustration. “I’ve been trying to figure out which terrifies me more, taking you with me and putting you in danger as a result, or leaving you behind where I can’t get to you if something happens.”

“It’s definitely safer to have me with you.” I inform my mate confidently. “You’re the one who said the only time I’m truly safe is when I’m in your arms.”

Sinclair laughs warmly, squeezing me closer. “Why do I feel like you’re not the most objective opinion on this?”

“Because you’re so blinded by your love for me that you assume I’m in the same boat, but don’t worry because I am completely unbiased.” I declare, shifting to straddle his lap.

“Oh, so you aren’t blinded by your love for me?” Sinclair teases, stroking my sides.

“It’s different.” I hedge, “I’m not exactly sure how at this moment, but there’s no doubt in my mind that it is.”

“You do know that being adorable won’t make me change my mind, don’t you?” Sinclair asks gently, grazing his knuckles over my cheek.

“That makes it sound as if you’ve already decided.” I murmur, my insides tangling into knots. My wolf whimpers in my head, and before I can think about whether or not I’d shared the sound with my mate, he responds in a way that guarantees he did. He begins to purr, gathering me to his chest and tucking my head under his chin.

“I haven’t decided anything yet. I’m honestly very conflicted, Ella.” Sinclair admits. “I’m leaning towards leaving you here with Gabriel, Roger and Dad. I trust them and I trust the security here. I want you with me, I just can’t help but feeling it would be irresponsible... honestly it feels selfish, like I’m choosing my own comfort and happiness over your safety.”

“But I want to be with you too. So if it’s selfish, let’s be selfish together.” I beg. Pushing away from him, I make my eyes wide and push my lower lip out into a dramatic pout. “Please don’t leave me behind, Dominic.” I continue, trailing my hands down his chest as inspiration strikes. “My wolf won’t obey anyone else, you know I’ll just get into more trouble without you... and when I do there certainly won’t be anyone to bring me back in line.

A growl vibrates in Sinclair’s chest, so fierce the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. His hand closes over my nape a second later, applying just enough pressure to make me quiver with the instinct to submit. “I have news for you, trouble. If I do go without you, I’ll have the others keep track of all your mischief so that I can hold you accountable when I get back.”

I fight back a shiver as his authority washes over me, so I change track. “Fine, but if you’re not here then who will give me pleasure when I wake up in the middle of the night... aching for you?”

Sinclair laughs aloud, dragging my mouth to his. I gasp as our lips collide, and Sinclair takes the opportunity to slip his tongue inside, tangling it with my own. Only when my mouth is red and swollen, and I’ve forgotten our conversation entirely, does he release me. He keeps our eyes level, massaging my head through my thick rose gold tresses. I loll my head into his hand, and he takes the opportunity to dip his tongue into the hollow of my throat. “When that happens you’ll call me to your dreams, and tell me exactly what you need. And then I’ll happily ravish you to my heart’s content.”

“You mean my heart’s content?” I clarify.

“No. I meant exactly what I said.” He answers with a smirk.

I laugh and drop my head to his shoulder. “Alright, big bad wolf.” I concede, even as he

continues to run his fingers through my long hair. “Just promise me you’ll think about this. We’ll both be happier together. We’ll both be less anxious. I’ll always be in your sight or reach. That’s worth a lot.”

“I’ll think about it.” Sinclair agrees. “There are a lot of advantages, I just need to make sure it’s right.”

“Thank you.” I exhale, so comfortable and cozy that I already feel as though I might doze off again. Maybe I’m being a wild optimist, but I truly think I’ve gotten through to my mate. I can feel how strongly he wants to take me with him, and I think this conversation went a long way to convincing him to trust those impulses.

The next day I go to visit some of the refugees arriving at the port. Sinclair stayed at the Palace to plan, but Henry, Roger, Cora and I set out with a contingent of Gabriel’s royal guards. The refugees are arriving in much the same way we did, cramming into small passenger planes carrying all their earthly belongings, arriving lost and depleted at the air base outside the city. Gabriel is trying to figure out where to send them all and has thus far been relying on local Vanarans who are willing to open their homes as shelter, but I’m determined to help – to find the best solutions possible for our people.

As we cross the Vanarium bridge spanning the crystalline waters of the lake, I can’t help but feel a renewed sense of awe at our stunning surroundings. However my admiration quickly fades when our cars pull up outside a group of large white tents erected to triage the incoming shifters. As I understand it, some of the refugees are arriving injured and in need of urgent medical care, others have been separated from their families, while others still are grieving the loss of their home and loved ones.

I try to brace myself for the harrowing experience ahead, only to become distracted by Cora’s incessant fidgeting beside me. It hasn’t escaped my notice that my sister is behaving very oddly today, she keeps shooting Roger wary looks, then pretending like he doesn’t exist if he returns the gesture. This morning she would fall silent or walk away if Roger came near us, and though my instincts aren’t sending up red flags about the interaction, I’d have to be blind to miss them.

So when we exit the car I sidle up to my brother-in-law, “Would you like to tell me why my sister keeps taking off like a startled hare every time you glance her way?” I mutter under my breath.

“I don’t think she’s a very big fan of mine.” He concedes.

“Why not? What did you do?” I inquire, unable to keep a note of accusation from my voice.

“Why do you assume I’m the one at fault?” Roger jokes, pretending to look affronted.

“Because I know my sister and I know you.” I snort, only partly serious. The truth is that my sister is as flawed as anyone, but I’m predisposed to take her side.

Roger shrugs. “We got to talking the other day, and I have the feeling she thought my questions were too personal.”

I pause, surveying him closely. There’s an odd note in his voice, one I haven’t heard before. For the first time it strikes me that Roger’s interest in Cora might not be entirely innocent. “What kind of questions?”

Roger laughs. “Nothing bad, I asked about her dreams and ambitions. I think she might be having a hard time with all this.” He says, gesturing around us. “Leaving her job and life in Moon Valley.”

A stab of guilt pierces me. Some sister I’ve been. I haven’t even checked in with Cora about how she’s doing. I’ve been so preoccupied with my own life and the war that I forgot that this transition won’t have been any easier for her. I make a note to talk to her as soon as possible – about fleeing and Roger’s interest. Still there’s no time for that now. There are dozens of wolves waiting to see us, and though I’m more than a little apprehensive about the sorrows and abuses to which I’m about to bear witness, I know my people deserve to have their stories heard. I have to be strong – I have to make my mate proud and do right by the pack, no matter what.

Chapter 160 – Refugees

Ella

I'd known it wasn't going to be easy. I was prepared to hear from grieving widows, wounded warriors, and heartbroken families. I was prepared to see their gruesome injuries and desolate faces, to hold their hands while they wept. I was not prepared for the orphans... or for the parents who lost their children.

When we first walked into the main tent, the refugees had been too caught up in their own worlds to notice us, but that quickly changed. As soon as they realized that not only the Vanaran King, but myself, Henry and Roger were present, they were on their feet, gathering around us in eager throngs. I'm not sure why it surprises me, but they seem even more thrilled to see me than the others, and soon a pink blush is covering my cheeks as they cry out my name.

"It's Ella! It's our Luna!" More than one wolf throws their arms around me, and despite everything these people have been through, they only express worry for me and Sinclair. "We're so glad you're all right. Is Alpha Dominic—"

"He's safe." I promise. "He's in the capital trying to build the war effort." I share, raising my voice so I can be heard over the melee. "

He would have come along to see you but he's spending all his time planning and trying to make alliances. He's determined to take back the continent from Damon before anyone else can be harmed ... but it's slow going."

Murmurs of understanding move through the crowd, and I'm ushered in to sit at the heart of the group. A hollow-eyed woman moves all the clothing and personal items from her cot so that I can sit down, ignoring my protests. Soon I'm seated in a large circle, with shifters gathered around on the floor or other cots. The people seem to want to hear the story of our escape, but I can't allow this.

"Dominic and I got out very early, because the Royal Army was on our doorstep. We don't know what's been going on at home except for the few videos people have managed to get out past the media blockade. What we need most is to hear from you, we need to know how the pack is doing, we need to know what we can do to help you feel at home here. And your stories can help us understand the situation on the ground so we can fight back where it counts."

The refugees exchange a few mournful glances, before they start speaking one by one. Over the next few hours I hear so many stories of tragic loss, violations and abuse, that it's all I can do not to fall to pieces. I listen with all my attention, trying not to steal focus by making a scene and crying like a baby, no matter how badly I want to. I thank the people for sharing their experiences, giving hugs and making notes for myself so I can

work with Gabriel on finding places for all these people to stay.

I'm actually proud of how well I manage to keep it together, until we visit the tent where the orphans and unaccompanied children are staying. My first thought when I enter is that it's much, much too quiet. I believe any place where children reside should be loud and messy, chaotic with the energy and playfulness of little ones.

Instead I find a room full of pups who have aged well beyond their years in the last few days, and my heart cracks open in despair.

There are pups ranging from infancy to young teenagers here, though the group seems to skew younger overall. However, unlike the adults, the children don't seem to care that they have visitors, or even notice that we're here. There are neglected toys sitting in the middle of the tent, and when I can't get a single child to meet my gaze I simply go and sit down on the floor in front of a tower of blocks.

Gabriel, Henry, Roger and Cora stand at the entrance and watch me with baffled expressions, but I simply begin to play with the toys, first building a tower and then grabbing a couple of dolls and staging my own small-scale production of a popular fairy tale.

I'm sure I seem like I've lost my mind as I begin speaking in silly high pitched voices and ridiculous dialogue, but soon enough a small herd of hesitant pups have gathered around me. I pretend not to see them at first, then pause, "If only I had someone to play the witch." I muse aloud, tapping my finger to my lips.

"You could use this one." A little voice murmurs beside me, holding out a third doll. "That is an excellent idea." I agree, smothering my pleasure and pretending like this is no big deal. "But I only have two hands... do you think you could help me?"

The little girl balks slightly. "I dunno the story." "Well that's okay." I reason. "We can make up our own story. Sometimes that's the best thing to do when things don't go as planned."

She still looks hesitant, so I bounce one of the dolls in my hand over to her, pointing it in the direction of the offered doll. "Hmm, are you a good witch or a bad witch?" I say in the doll's silly voice.

The corner of the child's mouth twitches up, and then she drops her voice to it's lower octave and says, "I'm a bad witch of course, mwahaha."

I pry up each of my doll's hands so that they're raised in the air above it's head. "Aaaahhhh, it's a witch, it's a witch! What do we do! Somebody help!"

Right on cue, a little boy steps up and grabs a fourth doll, "Don't worry, I'll save you!" Now I do grin, and little by little the other children join into our game of make believe, until they're enjoying themselves so much that I'm able to back away and look on with the others.

I feel tears burn in my eyes as I watch them, but instead of tears of sadness these are tears of cold fury. I'm so angry at the man who caused so many little ones such pain, that suddenly my wolf is entertaining gorey fantasies of her own. I'm so caught up in my wrathful fantasies, that I almost don't notice a pale woman near the edge of the play area.

She's got great black circles beneath her eyes, and her arms are wrapped tightly around her body. She's watching the children with an expression of such longing and heartbreak that my stomach roils. I have a terrible suspicion that I know her story, and I carefully approach beside her. "What's your name?" I inquire gently.

She was so caught up in the pups' game that her eyes jerk to me in surprise, then drop to my round belly almost as quickly. Something inside her hardens, and she barely grits out her name, " Isabel."

"I'm sorry that we're meeting in these circumstances, Isabel." I reply softly. "I'm Ella." "I know who you are." She answers, shooting me another sullen glance.

I debate what to say next. First I consider sharing the story of the day I thought I'd lost Rafe, and how unimaginable the pain was... but in the end I think my own happy ending might just remind her that she wasn't so lucky. Instead I nod towards the pups.

"These little ones need more than the volunteers here can provide, more than shelter and food." I sigh, letting my genuine concern and sadness bleed into my voice. "They need what they lost — love and nurturing, the protection of a parent." I watch Isabel closely, seeing the way the well of grief in her eyes deepens at my words. " I'm wondering whether you might be interested in helping here..."

Her eyes widen, but she still watches me with a begrudging expression, as if she's determined not to like me. "We could arrange a salary for you —"

"I don't need to be paid to care for orphaned pups." She snaps, affronted by the suggestion. I shrug. "You may not want it, but there may come a time when you could use the funds. We can put it aside for a rainy day."

She gives me a noncommittal shrug, then looks back to the pups, her longing tinged with hope now. "Go on." I encourage, "whether you want to think of it as a job or not, don't let your love go to waste. You have it to give, and they need it."

Isabel's lower lip trembles, and steps forward uncertainly. I can see that she wants it so badly she can taste it, and I try to nudge her forward with my nascent powers. Isabel pauses, casting a final glance over her shoulder. "I know what you're doing, you know."

"Then you know there's nothing to fear by accepting." I reply, not the least bit bothered by her scowl. I know what it's like to feel anger or jealousy for women with children when I didn't have any of my own, and I can only imagine the pain one must feel to have had a child taken, and how much deeper those feelings of resentment must run.

Still, as I watch the childless mother enter the circle of little ones, her entire demeanor transforming as she introduces herself to the pups, I feel a sense of profound rightness deep in my bones. When

Henry wheels up beside me, there's only one thought on my mind. "Dominic needs to see this. He needs to meet these people and hear their stories for himself. I'll never do them justice."

"I agree." Henry murmurs. "Though I doubt you'll find it easy to convince him." I set my shoulders, determination pumping through my veins. "Just watch me."

Chapter 161 – Approaching Sinclair

Ella

When we return to the palace I go straight upstairs to the office Sinclair has been using as his war room. Of course, there was a war room in his mansion back home too, but that one had been for the campaign, this one is only too literal.

When I walk into the tense space, I find my mate standing over a large diorama of the continent, a to-scale model of the territories, terrain and cities of our homeland. Tiny figures are scattered throughout the lifelike reproduction, forming armies, groups of civilians, rogues and refugees. A group of warriors surround the table supporting the miniature world, listening as Hugo delivers the evenings brief.

“Our spies report that despite their alliances during the campaign, Damon’s armies have now turned against rogue forces in the neutral territories.

Apparently his conquest of the united packs is complete enough that he’s able to turn his attention to other threats, and he’s not hesitating to do just that.” Hugo explains. “Any resistance in the packs has gone underground because of his severe crackdown, and more and more shifters are attempting to escape. These are mostly those who have reason to fear the Prince due to their politics or status in the pack, but others flee for no other reason than the loss of their homes and loved ones. The people recognize that any future under Damon’s rule is bound to be bleak, so they’re leaving instead.”

“I can’t believe he’s done so much in so little time.” One of the warriors pipes up. I recognize the man as Sinclair’s third now that Gabriel is gone, but I can’t quite recall his name. Philip? Phelan? Phineas?

‘To your point, Philippe, Damon has moved very quickly. He hasn’t just gone after the Alpha council and their betas, he’s been taking out the elders in each pack as well, plus any wolves that might be strong enough to make a claim for Alpha. He’s eliminated any and all competition, created a power vacuum everywhere but on the throne. It’s nothing new in terms of authoritarianism, but it’s damned effective.”

“Do we know if any of the elders have survived?” Sinclair inquires, his handsome face twisted into a grimace.

“If they have then they’re in hiding or attempting to escape.” Hugo sighs.” Essentially anyone who might have helped us has gone radio silent out of fear of detection, and rightly so.”

“So basically we’re on our own.” Sinclair assesses gravely, “Even if we can dredge up some alliances in Vanara, we’re likely going to be going in blind when we return home.”

I feel a pang of deep sympathy for my mate, one I apparently sent through the bond, because no sooner have I processed the feeling than Sinclair's head jerks towards the door, eyes searching. I realize he was so focused on the task at hand that he didn't even realize we'd entered, and I try not to feel a sting of hurt. How can I possibly blame him for being preoccupied with all this going on?

Hiding from me, trouble? His voice sounds in my head, and I immediately understand why he might suspect this.

I'm standing behind Roger and Gabriel, completely blocked from view. There's also a fan directly across from us, blowing our scents down the hall rather than allowing them to permeate the small space. Of course not.

I reply, wishing I could go climb into his arms. We just got back.

Any doubt I'd felt about my place among Sinclair's priorities disappears when the meeting comes to a stand still for our exchange, and the next thing I know his fierce gaze is ordering the men in front of me to move so I might pass. I slip between them and try not to blush under the scrutiny of so many wolfish eyes, melting into Sinclair's side as he tucks me under his arm. I feel calmer at once, filled with his warmth and surrounded by his muscular embrace.

Only once Sinclair has turned my face up to kiss me senseless, does the meeting continue. I'm a bit surprised that my overprotective mate is allowing me to be part of such a stressful and disturbing briefing, but I'm also grateful. I need to know what's going on for my own peace of mind and so that I can support my mate. It's right that I should be here.

I would be lying if I said the details I learned didn't weigh on me terribly, but soon enough Sinclair is leading me back to our forest suite, and it's all I can do to hold my tongue until we're alone. I have so much to tell him about my visit with the refugees, and I can't wait to take him back to the camp.

Of course, my mate seems to have little interest in talking when we're finally alone. Instead he pulls me into his arms and slams his mouth to mine with an urgency that frightens and delights me. Goddess I missed you, today. He admits in my thoughts. My wolf was furious that I let you go out into the city without me.

Hmm, just think about how furious he'd be if you went gallivanting around Vanara and left me here all by my lonesome. I reply saucily, nipping his lower lip with my fangs.

Sinclair growls and delves his tongue between my parted lips, gripping my hips and pressing me into his hardness, letting me feel how badly he needs me through physical exertion, as well as our bond. Careful little wolf, He warns. If I didn't know any better I'd

think you were trying to manipulate me. I arch into him, my blood heating to a steady boil as he extracts kiss after kiss from my lips.

I would never dream of it. I answer, earning an indulgent chuckle from the ravenous predator.

Impudent mate. A little while ago I planned on convincing Sinclair to visit the refugees before climbing into my nest for a late afternoon nap, now those things are the farthest things from my mind. All I can think about now is joining with my mate, letting our two bodies become one and disappearing into the rapture of being claimed by this powerful Alpha.

Sinclair is always a fierce lover, but today he seems particularly on edge. I'm not sure if it was the meeting or my provocation, but I can tell he needs this even more badly than I do. He strips off my clothes right there in the entrance of our rooms, then lifts me into his arms and guides my legs around his waist, before pressing my bare back into the door. He's still fully clothed, but when I reach for the buttons of his shirt he merely grumbles and I instinctively retreat.

There is no foreplay, no dirty words or teasing. Instead Sinclair slips his hand between my legs to make sure I'm ready for him, before freeing his cock and driving himself deep. He takes me without restraint, fisting his hand in my long hair as he withdraws his full length before slamming back into me over and over again. His feral need is contagious, and soon I'm as wild as he is, rocking my hips up to meet him as he closes his teeth around my mark. I cry out when he sinks his fangs in, cresting a wave of pleasure from nothing more than his possession. When he spills himself inside me moments later, I find myself unraveling once more, uncontrollably clenching and clamping around his hard member.

When Sinclair kisses me in the delirious aftermath, I can taste my own blood on his tongue, and I'm surprised to find it strangely erotic. Breathing heavily, Sinclair pulls me from the wall and carries me to my nest, dropping tender kisses to my hair. "Sorry about that trouble. I think I got carried away."

"Don't apologize." I tell him with a sated smile. "I love it when you get carried away."

"Do you now?" He purrs, stroking my hair as he lies back onto the thick bed of pillows.

"Mhmm," I sigh, snuggling in as he pulls a blanket over us. Only now am I permitted to unbutton his shirt so I can feel his bare skin against mine, and press my nose to his chest to breathe in his scent. "It makes me feel very powerful... knowing I can make my mate lose control."

"Only you, Ella." Sinclair professes, and I can feel his love for me blazing through our

bond. "You're the only one that can do this to me."

I flush with feminine pride, nuzzling his pec and giving it a nibble. "Are you feeling better?" I inquire drowsily. He hadn't said a word or let me feel his stress, but it's obvious he was struggling. Between the grim briefing and my absence, is it any wonder he was so on edge?

"Much." He assures me, continuing to purr as he rubs my back. I'm sure he senses how ready I am for a nap, but I won't be discouraged from my mission.

"You have to come meet the refugees with me tomorrow." I tell him. "I've decided I'm going to go every day, and I think it would be really good for you to see them too."

To my immense surprise, Sinclair goes stiff beneath me. "I don't think that's a good idea."

I rally my strength to lift my head from his chest, "why not?"

Sinclair frowns deeply, still petting me, but he won't look at me. "I just don't." He answers distantly.

"Dominic, talk to me." I beg. "Why don't you want to go?"

"Because," he clamps his eyes shut, and I feel a rush of annoyance from him, frustration that I'm pushing him. I don't care, if I know anything about this stubborn man, it's that he needs a good push every now and then." Because it's my fault they're even here. The Prince didn't start this war... I did."

Chapter 162 – Knocking Some Sense into the Alpha

Ella

“Dominic, what are you talking about?” I ask, shocked beyond belief by his last statement. Any tiredness I’d been feeling after my long, emotionally draining, day dissipated the moment Sinclair claimed responsibility for the war. Just in case, I push myself up into a sitting position so that I can’t be lulled unwillingly to sleep by my crafty mate.

Sinclair takes a deep breath, not quite meeting my gaze. “If I hadn’t called that press conference, if I hadn’t publicly accused him of treason, none of this would have ever happened.”

For a moment I ponder this, testing it for validity. I don’t want to invalidate Sinclair’s feelings, so I’ll consider his statement and give him my honest assessment. Unfortunately for him, it doesn’t take long for me to come to the opposite conclusion. “That’s ridiculous.” I object, apparently forgetting my intention not to invalidate him. “Dominic, if you hadn’t called the conference then the press was going to firebomb your campaign in the morning. We would have lost and he would have come to power anyway. You did everything in your power to prevent that from happening.”

“Yes, but if we’d just let them run the story and accepted the consequences of our lies, he wouldn’t have needed to stage a violent coup, he simply would have won the election. The King, the Alpha council and the Elders would all still be alive if I hadn’t tried to beat him at his own game.” Sinclair reasons miserably, shifting my body off of his so that he can sit up as well. To my immense hurt, he turns his back to me, though I know he’s only acting out of his own guilt and shame.

“We couldn’t have known what would happen, my love.” I state gently, crawling up behind him and massaging his broad shoulders.

“No, I should have known!” Sinclair exclaims. “I knew what Damon was — I knew what he was capable of. I let my anger and hatred get the better of me and lashed out instead of using my head.”

“And tell me. What would using your head have looked like?” I demand, hoping that working through the logic will show him that we did the best we could with the information we had. “We were between a rock and a hard place, you were trying to protect your family and your people. What were we supposed to do in that situation?”

“I should have killed him when I had the chance.” Sinclair grumbles. “I would have lost the throne but at least all of the people he’s murdered and tortured would still be here. It didn’t have to be me.” He shakes his head, his hands curling into fists. “It was my fucking pride, my ego — thinking it was my duty and mine alone. Trying to fulfill my father’s

unfinished work.”

The depth of Sinclair’s anguish sends me reeling, and suddenly I realize why he’s been shielding so many of his feelings from me since we arrived. I thought he was protecting me from his stress, and then his guilt for my own plight, but it was so much more.

He wasn’t just blaming himself for bringing me into his world... he was blaming himself for the entire war. My wolf begins to howl in my head, and I have to fight back tears. I can’t make this about me.

If he thinks I’m upset by his pain, he’ll shut it away again and focus on comforting me, and I will not allow that. My brave, selfless mate is suffering, taking the entire world on his shoulders and raking himself over the coals simply because he tried to do right by his people.

Taking a deep breath, I try to make my voice firm and even. “You did the best you could with the information you had.” I begin, proud of my steady tone. “None of us could ask for any more from our leaders —”

“Good intentions don’t negate all the pain, death and chaos I caused!” Sinclair interrupts, surging up from the bed and abruptly ending my massage. “I could have done more. I could have worked harder, been better, smarter! It didn’t have to be this way.”

My temper is straining now, because not only is this twisted logic harming my mate, but it simply isn’t fair. “Maybe you’re right.” I snap suddenly, surprising us both. “Maybe you do have an ego problem, because if you think that you’re so powerful and all-knowing that you could have stopped all this on your own, then you’re clearly delusional.”

I climb out of bed, following my brooding Alpha. “Stop giving yourself so much credit, Dominic. You weren’t alone in this. Where was the Alpha council, the elders when Damon was campaigning? This government is supposed to have all these checks and balances, and you still ended up out on a limb, and it wasn’t because you were the only one who could. You were alone because no one else had the balls to stand up to him!”

“They didn’t act because I didn’t share what I knew!” Sinclair argues, glaring at me with barely contained ire. “If I had gone to them with my concerns then maybe we could have stopped this.”

“Anyone with two brain cells could tell that man was an unhinged lunatic.” I scoff. “You saw how easy it was for the reporters at the conference to believe our claims, to turn on him. Everyone knew what he was capable of all along, but no one wanted to upend the status quo.”

“Including me!” Sinclair explodes. “I went along with the campaign when I should have

just taken him out!" He clenches his jaw as if trying to hold back, then adds. "And the worst part of all is that I left my people! I abandoned them as soon as things turned for the worse. I could have stayed and fought for them and instead I saved myself and ran!"

Stop blaming my mate for things that aren't his fault! My wolf snarls, her volume so staggering that I wince.

Sinclair blinks in surprise, and I don't blame him. I've never been one to yell, and I've certainly never been this furious with my mate. "I won't stand here and let you torture yourself for Damon's crimes." I grit our, employing all the ferocity my small body possesses.

"You have only ever tried to help, care for and protect the united packs. You gave up having your own ambitions or dreams because you felt the weight of responsibility that came with your power, and you have never once tried to shirk it. Even now, you're so devoted to them that you won't eat or sleep or employ basic logic!"

"You didn't do this, and you didn't set it in motion either." I'm growling and baring my fangs, and I can feel my wolf clawing to get out. Meanwhile Sinclair's glowing gaze is locked on me as I stalk around him, his hands clenching and unclenching as if he wants to reach out and grab me.

"The only person who is responsible for this war is Damon, and if you'd killed him and let someone else take the throne, then there's no telling what other unforeseen consequences might have happened." I shake my head, setting my jaw. "And if we hadn't left, the Royal Army would have killed us—"

"I didn't mean you, I was always going to get you out." Sinclair interjects, his voice like gravel. "Oh, so it's okay for me to run away so we can fight another day, but when you do it, you're a coward?" I bite, shooting daggers at the impossible man.

"You have a bad habit of taking on guilt for everything that goes wrong in the world, and I hate to break it to you, but even you aren't that powerful, Dominic." I close the distance between us, notching my chin up to glower at the man I love.

"There is no use torturing yourself for things that were out of our control and that we cannot change. And I would thank you to stop saying I and me and my when we are in this together." I add spitefully, beyond annoyed that he keeps acquitting me of any blame with his ridiculous statements.

"Stop hogging all the guilt." I enunciate, jabbing my finger into his chest with each word. Sinclair's wolf is growling in my head, but I'm not finished yet.

"And another thing," I hiss. "The people that are fleeing here need to see you. They need

to see their leader and you aren't helping them by staying locked up here plotting violence. They're hurting and grieving and it might be some comfort for them to know you are too." I gnaw on my lip as I consider my next words, not wanting to undermine my previous statements.

"And if you are so determined to blame yourself — which is idiotic, by the way — but if you are, then the least you could do is look them in the eyes and face the consequences of your actions. Hiding from the fallout wouldn't just be a disservice to them, it would be a betrayal, and you're better than that."

Sinclair continues to tower over me with the same foreboding, enraged expression, but I cross my arms over my chest and dig in my heels. "And if you want to spank me or tie me up or whatever other kind of twisted punishment your wolfy brain can think up for challenging you, then go right ahead. But I won't apologize for saying or thinking any of this because it's true and you know it!"

I begin backing away from him little by little, painfully conscious of the line I've just crossed now that the adrenaline is fading. The corners of Sinclair's mouth quirks up, and he prowls after me, all predator. I'm getting ready to turn tail and run, when he pounces, scooping me up into a bear hug.

The next thing I know he's purring in my ear, his love pouring over me in a tidal wave through our bond. "Thank you." He breathes in my ear. "I needed to hear that."

I blink, squeaking. "Really?" "Yes, baby." He croons, kissing my forehead. "You're exactly right. First thing tomorrow I'll come with you to the camps. I'm sorry I've been such an ogre."

"You know if you'd told me you were feeling this way, I could have yelled at you sooner." I quip, clinging to the huge Alpha with all my strength. Sinclair chuckles and pinches my bare bottom. "Don't push your luck, trouble."

Chapter 163 – Sinclair Visits the Refugees

Sinclair

When we arrive at the air field, I do my best to keep Ella from feeling my nerves. As loathe as I am to admit it, part of me is still terribly afraid that my people will blame me for everything that's happened. My angel of a mate did wonders assuaging my own guilt, but I know how grieving and heartbroken people often need someone to blame for the world's cruelty.

The Alpha in me kind of wants them to lash out at me, because I know I can take it and at the end of the day the responsibility is my own. The man in me, however, is beyond agitated by the thought of the pain this would surely bring.

Ella glances up at me as we move towards the tents, leaning her slight weight into my side and sending a rush of affection through our bond. It will be okay. Her precious wolf says to mine, and an image of the rose gold canine cuddling up to my brooding black beast appears in my mind's eye. I pull her a bit closer, purring my thanks in her mind. I know. I assure her. I'm always okay when I'm with you.

Ella's cheeks flush pink, and while this usually might put all sorts of ideas in my mind about how to make her blush more, the matter at hand is much too serious. When we enter the first and largest tent, a hush falls over the sprawling space.

Whispers of the Alpha start fluttering through the air, and I force myself to meet the eyes of each of the refugees. I'm mildly surprised to realize that the shifters in front of me come from all corners of the continent, far beyond the borders of my own pack. Yet they all call me Alpha with the same tone of reverence.

"I'm sorry I have not visited sooner." I state, raising my voice to be heard at the far end of the tent. "My beautiful mate convinced me that constantly focusing on war wasn't good for me or fair to you, and as usual, she was exactly right."

An appreciative chuckle travels through the crowd, and sweet Ella turns her body into mine, hiding her embarrassed face in my shoulder. I rub her back and drop an amused kiss to her hair, my wolf purring through the bond, What's wrong trouble, you only like my praise in private?

Apparently feeling emboldened, her wolf answers. Oh so you want me to share my blushes with all these other wolves? I would have thought you wanted them all for yourself but if you insist— before she can turn back I lock my arm around her waist, holding her in place.

Naughty mate. I tease, both amused, provoked and thankful that Ella is relieving some of my tension exactly when I need it most. Feeling heartened, I continue. "I cannot express

the depth of my sorrow and fury for what has happened to our home.

None of you should be here, none of you should have been forced to flee your ancestral lands, especially not at the hands of the person who is supposed to protect and care for you most. Damon's actions are a betrayal of the very worst kind, and though I cannot undo the damage that has already been done, I want you to know that I am doing everything I can in order to bring him down."

I pause, looking around the room to see how my words are being received. I see only wide, hopeful eyes, so I continue with the statement that scares me most of all. "I also need you to know how difficult it was for me to leave Moon Valley, and that I never would have done so if I saw another option.

It goes against every instinct in my body to flee rather than stand and fight, but I could see the writing on the wall. I could see that the Prince was going to win this battle and that if the united packs were to stand any chance of winning the war, then we had to survive and fight another day."

A few murmurs of approval bolster my spirits. "I am working hard to build alliances here in Vanara and am continuing to work with my connections to keep apprised of events on the continent, and when the time is right you have my vow that I will return to lead the rebellion against Damon. We will take back our home, and we will do everything in our power to make this right." Emotion is making my voice grow thick, and Ella opens her emotions to me so I can feel the depth of her pride.

"In the meantime, I want to hear from you all. Any intel you have to share, any concerns you need to voice, any needs you require to be fulfilled. I want to hear it all – good or bad." I continue, my voice growing strong again amidst my mate's encouragement. "I may not be able to visit as often as I like, but as long as we are here in Vanara, my door is always open to you, and I will set up channels to ensure you all have a way to reach me or Ella if you cannot find us in person."

As I finish my impromptu speech, I task Hugo with taking notes and Ella and I move throughout the tent, meeting with each refugee and family individually. Some are angry, as one might expect, others have problems or grievances to air about the camp or people they left behind.

However the vast majority of people have only kind words and thanks to share. My heart grows lighter and lighter as more and more shifters express how grateful they are for what we're doing, and that they understand why we left. However it's not until we meet a young couple with a pair of twin toddlers, that I finally forgive myself for leaving my pack behind.

While the children play on the floor in front of us, their parents sit wrapped in each

others' arms. They are from the shadow pack, and escaped because the man was targeted by the Prince's forces for being a possible contender to replace the murdered Alpha. "You must know what a symbol you two have become back home." He shares, looking between Ella and me.

My mate, who is thoroughly distracted by the little ones at her feet, takes a moment to process his words. "A symbol?"

"Yes." His wife confirms earnestly. "At first it wasn't clear that you got out, but then Damon put a bounty on your heads, blaming you for the murder of the King and the Alpha council, and of course in doing so he basically told everyone that you'd managed to escape."

"Bloody idiot." Her husband mutters. "He made it possible for the entire resistance to form around you. Everyone knows you're out there somewhere, plotting, waiting until the time is right to return. You are a beacon of hope for the entire continent."

Ella squeezes my hand, and I can barely contain my shock. "You mean... people aren't angry that I set all this in motion... that I left?"

The couple exchange shocked glances. "Of course not. You are the only thing keeping them going." The she-wolf expresses, still sounding bewildered. "The way they see it, you were brave enough to risk everything, including your own campaign, in order to do right by the people. And trust us, everyone would rather you run and be alive to lead us when the time comes, than for you to have been a martyr and left us alone in this fight."

I can't help myself. I plant my elbows on my knees and crumple in half, lowering my face into my hands and breathing an aching sigh of relief. Ella's tiny paw settles on my back, stroking my spine in long, soothing lines as her silken voice sounds in my head. See, you impossible wolf. I told you so.

I chuckle, turning my face to the impudent creature and feeling my heart stop in my chest from the mere sight of her smile. I catch her nape and pull her in for a fierce kiss, and my stationary heart leaps back to life until it's racing too fast to contain.

When we finally part, Ella and the she-wolf take the pups for a diaper change, and I find myself staring after my mate as she cuddles the little boy in her arms, making silly faces and nodding along as he babbles excitedly in baby language. When I turn back to the father, I find him watching me with a knowing expression. "It's amazing isn't it. How the tiniest look, the simplest gesture, can send you over the edge? It's pure witchcraft if you ask me."

I nod. "I never knew I could feel this way about anyone, and I've been with a fated mate."

The man chuckles darkly. "Just wait until your pup comes. If you think you're a goner now..."

I shake my head. "I can't wait... but I'm also terrified. And I can't stand the thought of welcoming a pup while we're at war."

He nods, "How are you holding up, having Ella caught in the middle of all this?"

"Not very well." I admit, thankful to talk about this with someone who understands only too well. "I'm trying to figure out what to do about building alliances, whether I should bring her along or leave her under lock and key. I hate the idea of being apart but..."

"But it's not about your happiness, it's about her safety." He surmises.

"Exactly." I groan miserably. "And at the end of the day she's safer here."

He purses his lips with grim understanding. "I would feel exactly the same way in your shoes."

Nodding I emit a heavy exhale. "She's going to hate me for this." I admit.

The other man pats my shoulder. "Better her hating you alive and well, than loving you six feet under."

Truer words have never been spoken.

Chapter 164 – Sinclair’s Decision

Sinclair’s Decision

Ella

I’m on cloud nine when we return from the refugee camps. My wolf is practically crowing with her success supporting our mate in his darkest and most thick-headed moment, and even my sister’s troubles with Roger aren’t enough to bring me down.

I take a quick shower before dinner, my mind swirling with ideas to surprise Sinclair this evening. He’s been going through so much and trying to bear it all alone, and all I want is to be there for him. I decide to sneak away while he’s finishing up his work so I can task a few servants with collecting some romantic items for tonight: massage oils so I can work the knots out of his tense muscles, chocolate and candies to indulge his sweet tooth... and maybe spread over my body for him to devour, candles and rose petals to set the mood, even some sexy pregnancy lingerie to tempt him.

I’m so excited to put my plan into motion that I’m grinning when I exit the bathroom, still toweling my hair dry. Unfortunately I stop dead in my tracks when I see him waiting for me, seated at the end of the bed watching me with a somber expression. Instantly I know that something is wrong, but I can’t imagine what it might be after we had such a great day.

“Sit down, trouble.” Sinclair instructs gently, patting the bed beside him.

My anxiety immediately spikes. I can count the number of times my mate has been in our bed without touching me in some way on one hand. Still, I gingerly cross the floor, cradling my pregnant belly in my hands, and perch beside him. I’m sure he can sense my unease, but instead of sending me waves of comfort in response, I feel only regret pulsing through our bond.” What is it?”

Sinclair gazes down at me with grim determination. “I’ve thought about this a lot, Ella. I’ve tried my best to be objective and not let my own wants sway me, and I’ve decided that when I leave on my diplomatic mission... I can’t, in good conscience, take you with me.”

My heart sinks, and my wolf whines pitifully in my head. “Why not? You promised you would think about it.”

“I have, baby.” Sinclair insists. “And it wasn’t easy. But I’d rather trust you with the devil I know than the one I don’t. I know the security risks here, I know the guard set up and emergency contingencies, I know Gabriel. I can’t say that about any of the places I’m going. I tried to work out some way to bring you along but at the end of the day I simply can’t trust unknown wolves with your safety, and I have to think that the Royal Palace is

the most secure place in Vanara, whether I'm here or not."

"But if I came along I wouldn't just be hovering in the background." I argue, pulling both of my legs onto the bed and turning towards him. "Think about how much I benefitted the campaign. If you need to schmooze and charm the Alphas, I can help!"

"I know." Sinclair confirms. "I thought about that, but I'm not sure the advantage you provide would outweigh the risk."

"You mean I might be able to help, but not enough to really matter?" I say, feeling my heart fall.

"That is not what I mean." Sinclair corrects immediately. "I mean that I would rather try my best and fail, than for both of us to try only to end up losing you or Rafe."

"But what about the third possibility?" I press. "Where you take me and we win them all over and no one gets hurt?"

Sinclair's mouth quirks, his eyes crinkling with affection. "It's still not worth risking the second option, little one."

I can feel my lower lip beginning to quiver, and I hear his wolf whine in my head, agitated by my imminent tears. "So you'd rather lose the war, than let me take just a fraction of the risks you are?"

"Ella," Sinclair murmurs, sliding his hand around my nape. "I believe that I can build the alliances we need, whether you are with me or not – not because I don't appreciate how much value you bring to the table, but because I'm determined to get it done no matter what. I have no plans on losing the war, and I know you don't need to be protected and spoiled, but I care about you too much to do otherwise. So please let me do this."

"But we're supposed to be a team." I insist, staring at my lap.

"We are a team." Sinclair professes emphatically. "But most teams require the players to fill different positions to support one another. I'm helping the team by meeting with the Alphas, and you'll be helping the team by helping Gabriel make arrangements for the refugees arriving from the continent, and helping Hugo respond to developments back home – plan countermoves when I'm out of reach. Not to mention growing our pup so that we have an heir when it's time to take the throne."

My thoughts can barely keep up with this. Until now, Sinclair hasn't mentioned anything about me acting as his official Luna in all this, but then again we've had little opportunity to talk about my role since my wolf woke up. "You mean, you're going to let me help strategize? To sit in on policy and warmaking meetings?" I ask, astonished.

Sinclair blinks incredulously. "Of course. You don't think I'm going to waste that brain of yours, do you?"

"But you've been so concerned with shielding me from stress." I reply, trying to justify my confusion.

"I'm learning, trouble." He chuckles. "It took a while but I've figured out that being out of the loop only makes you more anxious. Besides, your wolf is awake now, and I may have a hard time dumping my own worries on you, but I know you're more than capable of handling this role."

I'm touched, and beyond proud that he believes in me this much, but there's still one problem. "But part of being a Luna means taking care of you too." I state sadly. "I can't do that if you're thousands of miles away."

"We'll be in constant contact, Ella." Sinclair promises. "I'll call you every night and every morning, and we can always meet in our dreams."

For a moment, I feel pacified. Maybe he's right. Maybe it's smarter to divide and conquer... but, my wolf interjects, that's not what this is. He isn't suggested we separate so we can tackle different problems. He's doing it because he thinks we're too weak and vulnerable to withstand the risks he's going to be facing all on his own.

Her words ringing in my ears, I clamber to my feet, shaking my head." Dominic, I know I'm new to this and that I'm not as strong as you are, but I'm never going to grow into my power if you don't let me try. If you keep me in a bubble I'm just going to stay weak and dependent on others to get by." Suddenly Cora's words the day we fought are ringing in my ears, and though I don't regret looking out for my sister, I'm beginning to understand what she meant about constantly being sheltered.

"You aren't weak, Ella." Sinclair corrects me sternly. "And you are the least codependent person I've ever met."

"But I am dependant on others for protection in this world." I argue. "On you and my guards – and I will be until I learn to stand on my own two feet."

"Then maybe being apart will be good for you." Sinclair counters slyly, completely missing the point. "You can spread your wings without me hovering over your shoulder."

"That isn't what I mean. You might be leaving but you're still sheltering me... shielding me and coddling me." I insist. "You're keeping me in the safest circumstances possible and ensuring I don't have to fight or take risks." Sinclair unfolds from the bed, crossing his powerful arms over his chest." Well Goddess forbid that I should want to make my

breeding mate safe after everything we've been through." He growls sarcastically. "I promised I would take care of you, that I would make sure you never had to suffer poverty, abuse or neglect again."

"I know that," I sigh, "and I love you for wanting to give me only the good things in life... but that isn't our reality anymore, Dom. We're exiles and we're about to go to war. I can't, in good conscience, sit idly by while everyone risks their lives for me. I want to help, I want to prove myself worthy as your Luna."

"You have already proved yourself worthy a hundred times over, little wolf." Sinclair assures me, closing the space between us. "And I'm sorry that I can't take you with me, but I promise it's for the best."

My wolf is getting more frustrated and angry by the minute. "I might have proved myself to you, mate." I snap, "but I wasn't talking about you. I was talking about proving it to myself! I want to do this and I want to be there for you – And the fact is that you could take me if you chose, you're just not willing."

Sinclair clenches his angular jaw. "I'm not going to apologize for protecting you Ella. And you can be mad at me all you want, but I'm not going to change my mind."

"You know, except for our really early days together, I've always felt like you were in my corner. That you would support my goals and interests whether they aligned with yours or not. Then again, this is the probably the first time we've really been put to the test, so I guess all that was just wishful thinking." I shrug, fighting back tears. "And I've been wrong before, but you know what? I can't ever remember being so fucking disappointed." With that I turn on my heel and stalk out of the room, leaving my mate without a backward glance.

Chapter 165 – Kindred Spirits

3rd Person

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

"Where is everyone?" Cora asked, standing frozen in the doorway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?" Roger asked, flashing his fangs. "I hope not for my sake – I'd much rather have

your honesty than some fake nicety.”

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

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

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

“We're hardly strangers, Cora.” Roger replied easily, his wolf flashing in his eyes. “We're practically family – in-laws for all intents and purposes. If you can't be honest with family, then who?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roger sat back in his chair, assessing the disgruntled human with cool detachment. “Why shouldn’t I? Because you’re human, or because you don’t think you have anything to offer?”

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

Cora fought the urge to scoff. “You don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

“So correct me.” Roger invited, leaning forward in his seat. Now that he’d captured Cora’s gaze, he was determined not to break it, hoping his wolf’s power might compel her to open up.

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

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

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

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

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

Cora's eyes widened, "But... I thought..."

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

Cora visibly bristled, "want me?"

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

"But I'm human." Cora objected, so shocked her jaw actually dropped.

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

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

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

Chapter 166 – Ella Broods

Ella

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

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

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

You're right. That is ridiculous. Sinclair growls in my head, and I realize I accidentally projected my fears through our bond again. My mate sounds furious at the very notion, and apparently he was so affronted by this idea that he couldn't stay silent. You know how crazy I am for you, trouble. You know I'll always come back. You put those doubts out of your gorgeous head this instant.

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

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

I said get out! I repeat angrily, imagining a giant lock on the granite wall, and mentally slamming the bolt into the ground before wrapping it up in thick chains. I'm still not sure if it fixed the problem, so I decide to test my sneaky mate. Dominic, I want you to know you're a great big dummy. You smell terrible and your wolf has fleas.

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

Roger's husky voice floats through the door, and I can hear one racing heartbeat and another, much steadier one. "So what will it be, Cora? Do you want to surrender now? Or do you want to keep pretending like you don't feel this thing between us?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fight.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Absolutely not.” She answers firmly, shaking her head.

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

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

Chapter 167 – Going to Bed Angry

Ella

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

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

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

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

Finding a plush armchair, I pull it over to the bookshelf and clamber up onto my knees on the cushioned seat. Making sure I'm steady, I slowly get my feet under me, but unfortunately this doesn't make me tall enough to reach the top shelf. Testing one foot on the arm of the chair, I determine that it won't topple under my weight. Stretching as far as I can, my fingertips only graze the spine of the book, and I huff in frustration.

Keeping one foot on the arm of the chair, I balance the other on one of the shelves, pushing myself up to grasp the book. Just before my fingers close around the old leatherback, a thundering voice shatters the silence.

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

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

Sinclair's foreboding gaze bores into me, and suddenly I'm squirming beneath the weight of his scalding temper. "Is that really what you want to say to me right now?" He inquires

ominously, looking me over with concern even as he sends waves of Alpha authority through our bond to chastise me. “Goddess, Ella. Were you trying to break your neck?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now that’s an interesting idea. My sly wolf ponders. Maybe it’s not too late to change his mind. She has a point, but that wasn’t what happened and Sinclair will know if I lie. “I didn’t even know you were there.” I remind him sulkily, “And not everything is about you, Dominic.” I add spitefully, trying to drown out the swell of tangled emotions rising up inside of me. I feel like I’m all over the place, my moods swinging back and forth between sadness, worry, anger and resentment, muddying my mental state.

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

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

My heart softens toward him, especially when he lets me feel how distressed he’s been by my own unhappiness. My guilt increases, and suddenly tears are burning in my eyes.

I feel so overwhelmed and I'm not sure how to put my feelings into words. I also don't want snatches of chaotic emotion to reach him through the bond in case they send the wrong message, so I pull the mental wall down between us, locking it tight.

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

"I don't want to talk about it." I sniffle, wallowing in self-pity. "I just want to go to bed."

Sinclair moves into the sitting area, settling on the couch and arranging me in his lap. "We're not going to bed angry, little wolf." He informs me, firm but gentle.

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

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

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

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

My knees wobble, suddenly feeling weak. "So soon?"

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

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

I don't know what to do, because there isn't a right answer this time. If I stay behind then I'll be on my own, but the only challenge I'll face is getting through the day without my mate. If I go with him I might have a chance to prove myself, but I'll also be staying in the safe cocoon of his protection. So which is worse?

'This isn't going to get better, Dominic.' I finally reply, wrapping my arms around myself. "I don't want you to go without me. I'm no use to you or the pack if I'm here alone." I take a shaky breath, my throat itching. "And it does scare me to realize how much I need you, but not only because it makes me feel vulnerable, but because you're running off into possible danger and I'm terrified that if something happens and I'm not with you..." I trail off, not able to put my riotous emotions into words.

Sinclair exhales deeply and stands, his thumb brushing back and forth along my cheek. "And that's what I'm afraid of." He admits. "If something happens to me, I want you as far away from that danger as possible."

I gnaw on my lower lip, averting my eyes as tears well. 'Then there's really no way I can change your mind?' "No, Ella." Sinclair confirms. "My mind is made up." He towers over me, his wolf flashing in his eyes. "Now, about this climbing bookcases business..."

Chapter 168 – Sinclair Prepares to Leave

Sinclair

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s Ella for you.” I smile, unable to suppress my pride. “My little love magnet.”

Gabriel laughs, “What else?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I know she means it as a barb, but I have to admit this isn’t a bad idea. I think maybe I will. I’m going to miss seeing your stunning face and gorgeous curves while I’m gone. How about I take you upstairs and strip you naked, and we have a photoshoot.

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

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

trouble?

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

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

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

I chuckle, breaking the connection with Ella and returning to the matter at hand. "Sorry, I suppose I got carried away."

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

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

"Like what?" Gabriel asks, sounding a bit confused.

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

"I'm not opposed to it." Gabriel admits, "but I'm not sure this is the time to play that card. I'm sure my tech engineers can manage it, but if Damon gets wise to the hack then he might patch any weak spots or back doors into his systems, and you may need those for the war. I know you want to find out about Ella's past, but I don't think you want to compromise the revolution by doing so."

"You're right," I sigh, scrubbing a hand over my face. "We're probably going to need to hack him at some point or another, and I don't want to risk making our jobs even harder."

"Ella doesn't remember anything about her family?" Gabriel questions, and I appreciate that he's still searching for solutions.

"She was a baby when they gave her up." I explain, mentally sorting through all the conversations we've had up until this point. "There's a chance some details from her childhood might have been repressed, and we even talked about going to a hypnotist to see if we could uncover anything, but I don't know if she's ready for that."

“I don’t know if it’s ever possible to be ready for that sort of thing... especially not if her parents intentionally bound her wolf for so long.” Gabriel assesses. “But I can put some feelers out for hypno-therapists, and if she starts looking into her past while you’re away and wants to try going down that path, I’ll be prepared.”

“Thank you.” I breathe, feeling relieved already. I know none of this is going to resolve our fight, but I have to hope that staying busy and having her own purpose will help the next few weeks pass more easily for Ella. Part of me worries that I’m piling on too much, but that’s why I’m going to stay in close contact and make sure she has all the support she could want. Of course, I would have told her all this – asked her opinion and consulted her – if only she would speak to me.

I catch myself glancing back to Ella, who stubbornly pretends that she can’t feel my gaze. We only have a few hours left together, and I don’t want to leave on bad terms. Ella might not want to kiss and make up, but I’m not going to give her a choice. There’s no telling what might happen in the next few weeks, and we can’t take a single moment together for granted.

My wolf rumbles through our bond, and Ella’s rose gold head jerks up, her eyes wide as my words slip past her defenses. You have until this evening to sulk, little one. After moonrise we’re going to go for a run, and we’re going to settle this as wolves. Then I’m going to bring you home and claim you as many times as it takes for the message to sink in.

What message? Ella squeaks, and I can feel her heart racing through the bond.

That I’m only leaving you because I love you so much. I answer fiercely, my voice dropping to a gravelly purr. I’m going to rut you so hard that you won’t be able to walk normally the entire time I’m gone. So that every step you take and you feel that ache between your legs, you’ll think of me and remember exactly who you belong to. And when I come home, we’re going to do it all again. Do I make myself clear?

Once her shock wears off, Ella’s eyes harden and she scowls at me. You’ll have to find me first.

You do not want to hide from me mate. I warn her, my hackles raising.

Her wolf immediately rises to the challenge. Watch me.

Chapter 169 – Ella Hides

Ella

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dominic, let me go! This isn’t fair.” I object, wriggling and writhing in his arms.

“I disagree.” He purrs with dark amusement. “These were your terms baby, you set the challenge and I rose to it. And before you try to pretend otherwise, you should know I can feel how satisfied your wolf is. She knows this is the way it’s supposed to be.”

He’s right, the tyrant. My wolf is all ready to roll over and show him her belly, to invite his own inner animal to ravish her as if she’s not every bit as upset as I am that he’s leaving – if not more so. I’m muttering mutinously under my breath now, but Sinclair doesn’t seem to mind, he simply hitches me up into his arms and nods to Cora before carting me out of the room.

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

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

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

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

Sinclair strides into our rooms, and sets me on the ground, closing the door behind him. He stands before me with his hands on his hips, looming so close that mere inches separate us. No, it means you're frightened and hurt and lashing out at me when all I'm doing is trying to protect our family. He corrects me sternly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly I feel absolutely wretched for avoiding my mate – for running and hiding when he's exactly right. I'm on the verge of tears for the dozenth time today, but this is the first time it's due to my own guilt, rather than my misplaced anger with Sinclair. "I'm sorry." I hiccup, speaking aloud for the first time. I stop backing away, instead leaning forward and wrapping my arms around his middle. "You're right. I've been acting like a child."

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

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

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

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

Chapter 170 – Sinclair's Departure

Sinclair

The next morning Ella and I stay in bed as long as we're able.

I wake early, but my mate is snuggled so sweetly in my arms and I can't bear to disturb her – not even for an encore of last night's lovemaking.

After we resolved our fight, I'd been perfectly ready to take Ella to bed then and there – however, before I could lay a hand on her, she looked up at me with those big golden eyes and said, "I thought we were going to run?"

I purred knowingly, sensing her wolf's restlessness despite the fact that she'd tried to escape my plans for us. "So somebody's wolf wants to come out and play before I rut you senseless, hmm?"

"Well," She responded slyly, tangling her arms around my neck. "If you want to give me stability then following through on the expectations you set would be very important, don't you think?"

I couldn't help but laugh, throwing my head back and releasing a booming chuckle. "You do remember the second part of the promise I made you, don't you?" I teased, once I was able to speak again.

All mischief now, Ella batted her lashes, "something about not being able to walk until you come home to me?"

"That's right." I confirmed, running my hand down her back and over her luscious behind. "Only after your antics tonight I think we might need to add: not sitting for a week either."

My brazen mate rolled her eyes, even as her pulse spiked and the scent of her arousal rose to combine with her already intoxicating fragrance." Dominic, you are obsessed! You just spanked me yesterday."

"Because you were naughty yesterday too – and don't act like you don't love it every bit as much as I do." I warned, lowering my lips to my mark and nibbling Ella's scrumptious neck. I knew the sweet human was still struggling to come to terms with this side of her sexuality, but I wasn't going to show her any mercy. "I can smell your excitement, little mate." I reminded her. "Besides, I wasn't talking about spanking this time. You really pushed your luck today, so I'm going to have to get more creative."

Ella blinked in surprise, or she tried to. Her head was lolling to the side as I laved the soft spot behind her ear, and she was struggling to keep the gears working in her mind. When I pulled back to switch to the other ear, her quick mind was obviously trying to

piece together this puzzle. She was so distracted and consumed by her feverish lust that she eventually sent her confusion through our bond, but if it's not that, then why wouldn't I be able to... Deciding to help her, I trailed one finger down between the round globes of her bottom, tapping my fingertip against her back entrance through her bathing suit.

Oh! A shiver wracked her small body as curiosity, exhilaration and trepidation combined to make a sharp cocktail in Ella's blood, flowing from her senses into my own. It was a delicious combination. I've never done that before. Ella murmured after a moment, alight with nervous excitement.

I figured as much. I shared, delighted by this confirmation. It might have been irrational, as every first with my mate has been incredible, but I've always taken a certain smug pleasure in introducing Ella to new things. Especially the things that make her blush – the ones her human upbringing taught her to be embarrassed about but she can't help but enjoy. And even if you had, I doubt your abominable ex could have prepared you for me.

My words did exactly as I intended, and Ella's eyes widened as she considered our size difference. Will it hurt? She asked shyly, leaning into me for comfort even though I was the one scandalizing her sense of propriety.

It will in the beginning. It will feel strange and forbidden. But it's like taking my mark. I explained with a lethal grin, closing my teeth over that special spot once more. If your mate knows what he's doing, it can feel better than you'd ever imagined.

Then why is it a punishment? Ella inquired suspiciously.

Because it will take a bit of discomfort before you start to enjoy yourself, and because it puts you in a very vulnerable position, little mate. You have to trust me implicitly, and there is no better way to make you feel so thoroughly claimed – because there is no part of you that's off limits to me. No part that I haven't possessed.

Ella shivered again, and I didn't bother mentioning how much I was going to enjoy watching her blush and squirm over the new sensations. And Goddess did I.

After we returned from a long run on the shores of the lake, I spent a good long time preparing Ella, working her up to the edge of orgasm three times as I stretched and toyed with her tight back channel. Only then did I finally bring out my cock, gently rocking into her with lots of encouragement and praise as she grappled with the intrusion.

Sure enough, as intrigued as she'd been by the idea, her shyness and inexperience came out in full force once I actually began touching her in such a forbidden place. She was crimson faced and making the cutest sounds of reluctant pleasure and embarrassment well before we reached the main event, and when I was finally inside

her and began telling her how wonderful she felt – using the dirty words that scandalize and delight her in equal measure, she came to pieces in my arms.

Of course, that was nothing compared to the rapture she found when I began strumming her swollen clit and sank my fingers into her weeping sex on top of everything else. She cried out in ecstasy and slumped back against me, trusting me to support her as she disappeared to a heightened plane of erotic bliss. That was the point that I lost my own control as well, spilling my seed into her clenching sheath as I brought her over the edge again and again.

I'm sure Ella thought we were done after such an overwhelming mating, but I'm nothing if not good for my word. I kept my poor mate up all night long, exhausting her and putting my own endurance to the test. Luckily our ravenous appetites for one another were spurred on by the knowledge that this was our last joining for a few weeks, so we came together as many times as we were able.

So this morning, as I look down at my slumbering mate, overflowing with love and admiration as I caress her pregnant belly and commune with our unborn pup, I can only hope I did enough to satisfy and reassure her over the weeks to come. I've been watching her for a while when she finally stretches and emits a sleepy moan, making me rethink whether this morning should be reserved for innocent cuddles after all. My wolf drags his attention from Rafe, quieting his continuous proclamations of love for the tiny babe, to focus on our mate.

When Ella's dark lashes part and her beautiful gaze focuses on me, her brow furrows much too quickly for my liking. "I don't want you to go." She whispers, sounding so vulnerable it nearly breaks me.

"I don't want to go either." I confess, hoping that hearing my own reluctance will offer her some comfort. I understand Ella well enough to realize that knowing she's not hurting alone can go a long way to easing this ache. "But I'll be back before you know it, baby."

Her tiny hand moves to her navel, joining mine to rest above our son's kicking feet. "I'll be entering my third trimester by the time you're back. Just wait, I'll be as round as a beach ball."

I rumble regretfully, "I hate that I have to miss a single day of this miracle. I always thought that if I ever became a father I'd be there every step of the way."

Ella uses her free hand to stroke my jaw, "You'll be there for all the moments that count. This is the easiest time after all... I'm not constantly sick anymore, and I'm not so big yet that I can't be active. I'll just be sleeping a lot and making lots of odd snacks."

"But who will feed them to you?" I wonder, teasing her plump lower lip with my thumb.

“Well you are leaving me with lots of big strong guards.” Ella replies cheekily, “I suppose I could ask one of them.”

“Over my dead body.” I growl, claiming her lips in a punishing kiss. She whimpers into my mouth, sliding her hands into my dark hair and holding my face against hers. When we part, I’m struggling to keep my wolf under control. “Goddess, I miss you already and I haven’t even left.”

Ella smiles sadly. “I know you’re only going because it’s the right thing for the pack. And I’m going to do everything in my power to make you proud in the meantime.” She vows. By now she knows all the plans I arranged with Gabriel, and she immediately took them to heart.

“You already do make me proud.” I inform her honestly. “And with any luck, we might know where you come from by the time I get back.”

“I doubt that.” Ella frowns. Though she’d been honored by the responsibilities of watching over the refugees and planning the political summit, she’d been less thrilled with the idea of digging into her past – though I know that’s only because she’s afraid of what she might learn. Yet despite her anxiety, she continues seriously. “But if you really believe it’s important, I’ll do my best.”

“I do.” I confirm, grazing my knuckles over her cheek. “The more time that passes, the more I have to think you and I met by design... and I highly doubt the Goddess or whoever put all this into motion did so simply to make us happy. It’s possible your past is related to all this – the war, the revolution. We need to find out who you are, trouble.”

Ella nods. “Then we will. Just come back to me, Dominic. Whatever happens, promise you’ll come back to me.” “I promise.” I say, kissing her deeply and praying it won’t be for the last time. “Whatever happens.”

Chapter 171 – Separation

Ella

When Sinclair left, all my wolf wanted to do was climb up to the highest tower of the Prince's palace and howl into the sky, to cry out for our mate until our combined voices went hoarse. Instead I allowed myself a single hour of wallowing – I climbed into a bubble bath, turned on the saddest song I could find and cried until my tears ran dry. Afterwards I pulled myself together and got dressed, even though I could feel Sinclair slipping further and further away with every minute that passed.

We've never been this far apart since my wolf woke, and I'm amazed by how keenly I can feel his absence. As he drove away, Sinclair's beloved voice continued to sound in my mind, I love you, Ella. I love you, Rafe. But it faded in perfect synchrony with the widening gulf between our hearts, and eventually it went completely silent. Now the only way we'll be able to communicate through our bond is in dreams, otherwise we're stuck with the technologies I knew as a human: cell phones and emails.

I know the best thing for my agitated wolf is to keep busy, so I start my day by meeting Cora and Gabriel in the King's study, to begin planning the political summit Sinclair suggested. My sister is still half-asleep and sulking about the fact that Sinclair left Roger behind as added protection for us, but she offers me a sympathetic squeeze all the same. "How are you doing?" She murmurs, her arms locked around my back.

"Well I mate it out of bed and I'm not crying anymore... so better than expected." I confess, burying my face in her neck.

"Tsk, poor thing." Cora replies, rubbing my back. A note of humor enters her voice then, "My intrepid wolf sister, brought to her knees by a boy. I never thought I'd see the day." She teases, even though this isn't truly a fair assessment.

Sometimes I think my big sister is blinded by the relationship we had as children, because though she's remarkably perceptive about my personality in many ways, there are other facets that go over her head completely. She sees the protector, the martyr who suffered without complaint and then shut out all the pain for so many years. She doesn't see the love-starved girl so desperate for affection that she settled for scraps from a scoundrel. No, in fact if there's one of us who avoids attachments at all costs- it's her. Even as I think it, two new scents enter the room, as if they heard my inner musings and appeared to prove me right.

"If I were you, I wouldn't let Dominic hear you call him a 'boy'." Roger's husky voice has Cora pulling abruptly away from me, a scowl on her pretty face. He and Henry are framed in the doorway, though my sister doesn't seem to notice my father-in-law at all. Her full focus is on Roger.

“What are you doing here?” Cora inquires rudely.

I give her a little pinch on her arm, and she yelps and pinches me back, “Hey!”

“Play nice.” I instruct in a low mutter, even though I know the men can hear us perfectly well.

“Tell him.” Cora snipes, crossing her arms over her chest and refusing to look at the wolf now grinning at her like the cat who caught the canary.

I shoot Roger a withering look, and he has the decency to wipe the smirk from his face. “Alright.” Gabriel chuckles, taking the opportunity to steer us back to the matter at hand. “Let’s talk about the summit, we’ve got a lot of work to do and not much time to make it happen.”

“What exactly are we expecting?” I inquire, trying to recall the details Sinclair had shared with me in between sessions of our marathon lovemaking.

“Well, if all the Alpha’s turn up we’ll be looking at about twenty pack leaders with their mates, betas and guards.” The King explains. “We have gatherings of this sort a couple of times a year, so luckily my staff is well versed in housing, feeding and entertaining the lot – that isn’t anything we have to worry about.”

This is some relief, but my mind is lingering on all the refugees sleeping on rough cots in the camp near the air field. “What exactly is the palace’s full capacity? In terms of the number of shifters it can house?”

“We can support a few hundred people – not all at the same level of luxury of course. The guards and lower ranked members of each delegation will join my own in more modest quarters. Alphas will have suites similar to yours and Dominic’s, and betas somewhere in between.” Gabriel answers thoughtfully. “Why?”

“Well I know it’s not what we’re here to discuss right now, but I’ve been thinking about finding better lodging for the refugees from the continent. I hate leaving them in such stark conditions.” I frown. “I was wondering if we might be able to put them up here, though I know that’s a huge imposition.”

Gabriel offers me a gentle smile. “It wouldn’t be, but I’m not sure that’s the best option. We could feed them and put a roof over their heads, they could be near their leaders,” he acknowledges, nodding to me. “But in my experience coming into the lap of luxury when you’ve just lost everything you own can be a cruel reminder, and the palace isn’t exactly the warmest environment. I would suggest finding local families willing to offer their guest rooms so that the refugees can have a sort of home stay. Between us, we could find a way to supplement incomes to support the extra mouths being fed, and the

shifters from the continent would be welcomed into the arms of a real family and a real home.”

“I like that idea.” I agree, “and it would also help them integrate into the community here, to feel accepted. If there’s resistance to their presence among your own pack, this would also be an important way to build support. It would be especially good for the orphans.” I add, my mind returning to the children. “Maybe we could even place some of the parents who lost pups with the unaccompanied minors.”

Henry smiles, “Brilliant. Though you’ll have a time convincing Isabel to give them up.”

He has a point. The she-wolf I place in charge of the orphans has taken the job to heart, becoming a fierce protector and loving guardian for each of the parentless pups. The orphan tent has become something of a sanctuary under her leadership, and I doubt she’ll want to relinquish her new babies to other families. “I’ll talk to her.” I vow, “besides it’s good to have someone like Isabel in charge of placing the children anyway, she’ll ensure the foster families are top notch.”

“Ella’s right.” Cora pipes up, sending me a meaningful glance full of understanding, appreciation and bitter memory. ‘You can’t be too careful with children in these circumstances. And we could move her and the unplaced pups here in the meantime.”

“Agreed.” Gabriel nods, “And your point about public sentiment here is well taken. That is going to be one of our challenges with the pack leaders at the summer. If Damon continues to expel people at these rates, we’re

going to need to expand homestay placements outside of the capital. No shifter would begrudge the wolves fleeing his violence, but some of the leaders will be worried about the strain on their resources. I can think of a few particularly stingy Alphas who will require significant funding before agreeing to such a thing.”

“Sinclair has plenty of money to spare, even with the war effort.” Henry assures Gabriel, and I belatedly realize I don’t know the first thing about my mate’s finances. I know he’s a billionaire, but I don’t truly understand the extent of his wealth or liquidity – especially after fleeing the continent. My father-in-law turns to me now, ‘You two might have to make some hard decisions between winning the war and saving enough to rebuild afterwards, but I think that’s a ways down the road. For now I can work with you to appropriate funds to support the refugee efforts.”

“Thank you.” I profess, squeezing his hand before turning back to the King.” And the rest of the summit? What do we need to worry about most?”

‘Well, by the time they arrive, most of the Alpha’s will have already made up their minds about whether or not they’ll offer an alliance. One or two might withhold judgement to

see which way the others vote – to follow the popular tide as it were.” Gabriel explains. “Still, I think I can fairly predict who will be for and against you. It will be our job to focus on the latter.

There are four or five Alphas whose minds you’ll have to change, and we need to structure the events around the summit so you can do that, Ella.”

At first, I assumed he was speaking to all of us as a team, but when Gabriel calls me out by name, I blink in surprise. “Me?” I utter dumbly.

“Who else?” The King laughs.

“But I’m not... they don’t even... why? How?” I stammer, sounding painfully uncertain of myself.

“Because Dominic will have demonstrated his strength and leadership and made all the logical arguments.” Gabriel answers easily, “Where logic cannot sway, there is only emotion, and if anyone can soften their hearts to the cause, it’s you. And as for the how? All you have to do is be yourself.”

I can’t quite believe my ears. I thought that my usefulness to Sinclair was strongest in terms of supporting him, not in the actual politics. “If that’s true, then why didn’t Dominic take me with him?” I question. “I mean I know he was worried but, if I can actually help...” I trail off, doubting my mate’s explanations for the first time.

“Because we don’t want to give them too much time to think about it.” Gabriel shares slyly. The logic will be weighing on them for weeks, and the emotional impact will move them in the moment, but it will likely wear off after a few days. That’s why Dominic decided to do it this way. You can stay safe here with us while he travels and plants seeds in the minds of the leaders, then we bring them here – and you make them bloom.”

My wolf swells with pride, but at the same time I have to wonder. “I don’t get it. If this was the plan all along, why didn’t he tell me?”

“Because,” Henry smiles gently. “You wouldn’t talk to him.”

I flush scarlet. “Right.” I owe my mate a big apology.

My dear readers, Thank you for stopping by and reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it. I’m trying my best to update assp. I’ll appreciate it if you explore my other stories as well. Please follow my f*****k page Caroline above story and group Caroline above story if you wanna chat or keep updated on my writing schedule. Yours, Caroline above story

Chapter 172 – Convincing Isabel

Ella

After concluding our three hour summit meeting, where the King, my hybrid family and I decided on a few special events, we kicked off preparations for a welcome banquet, refugee camp visit, an open forum for debate, and a grand ball.

I'm still brainstorming different ideas for other ways to engage the reluctant Alphas, while grappling with the idea that I could play a pivotal role in convincing them to join our cause and wondering how I can make up for my coldness to my mate.

Still I have plenty of time to sort out those issues — now my full focus is on the refugees.

I arrive at the airfield just as a flight full of new exiles from the continent lands, and I watch in horror and heartache as they disembark the plane.

From the looks of it, this is the largest group to arrive so far, and they're mostly women and children.

We're losing more and more male wolves to this war, the ones who stay behind to fight or die protecting their families.

I help the Vanaran volunteers usher the group into the camp, taking a screaming infant from one of the guards who led the group out of Damon's brutal empire.

"Her parents died just a hundred yards from freedom." He shares bleakly, gently transferring the pup into my arms.

"I promised them I'd get her here, so that it wouldn't be in vain."

Tears well in my eyes as I rock the babe gently from side to side. I haven't welcomed my own baby yet, but my perspective on children has already changed so much. I've always loved them, always connected to and felt protective of them, but now that I'm learning the depth of a parent's love, I can never look at a child the same way again.

I'm painfully aware of how much this precious girl must have meant to her mother and father, and I know how much it would have meant to them that this man kept his promise.

"you did very well." I praise him.

"Her parents can rest in peace now, and one day she'll come to understand what you did for her. She has a future now — because of you."

His face is still downfallen, and there's a haunted look in his eyes which I recognize all too well.

"Would you like to come with me to the orphan's tent? So you can see where she'll be in case you want to visit?"

He stiffens slightly, but there's an flash of longing in his eyes.

"I doubt I'll have much chance. I've got to go back this evening."

"If you keep making these runs you ought to get to know some friendly faces here."

I suggest, even though I know the face he'll likely encounter before he can actually see the orphans is anything but friendly.

"I think it's important you come and visit, so you remember what an incredible difference you're making. If you try to stay disconnected then you might stop yourself from seeing how much good you're actually doing."

He still looks uncertain, so I make the decision for him.

"Come on."

I order, putting some of my newfound authority into my voice. I turn and carry the whimpering pup towards the orphan's tent, and a glance over my shoulder confirms the big man is trailing reluctantly after me.

Sure enough, Isabel appears almost as soon as we enter.

She shoots the guard a suspicious look, but is immediately drawn to the baby in my arms. She moves beside me with solemn focus.

We're hardly friends, but she seems to trust me now.

Isabel peers down at the squalling pup, clucking sympathetically as she traces a finger down her red cheek.

"Poor darling."

She murmurs, glancing at me for my professional opinion.

"About eight months?"

"Thereabouts." I assess, still rocking the distraught pup.

“She’s had a rough time of it.”

“Do we know her name?” Isabel asks, clearing her throat to disguise the thick emotion in her voice.

“Sadie.”

The guard pipes up from behind me, his deep voice low and gravelly.

Isabel’s attention swings towards the rugged wolf, and her eyes narrow in suspicion.

At once I’m struck by how many of the women in my life have this response to strange men — of fear and mistrust learned through terrible experiences. My heart wrenches with the sting of her pain, but I know this man doesn’t deserve her suspicion.

“Isabel, this is…”

I trail off, realizing I don’t even know this man’s name.

“James.”

He offers gruffly, his eyes still on the baby.

“This is James.”

I finish gently.

“He’s one of the guardians getting families off the continent. He rescued Sadie here.”

Isabel’s accusatory glare turns suddenly wary, and I can see her rethinking her first impression of James.

She gives him an acknowledging nod that would seem very reserved for most people, but which I know is a mark of great respect from Isabel.

“Thank you.” She says softly.

James’ eyes lift to Isabel’s face, and his dark eyes widen almost imperceptibly.

Suddenly he’s looking at her so intently that I feel as if I’m intruding somehow.

Isabel turns her head away, but I see the slightest flush of pink on her cheeks.

Interesting.

I think, with a flutter of excitement. I relinquish Sadie to Isabel so that she can get to know her newest charge, "Hello little one."

She greets her, and something in her voice makes me wonder if the child Isabel lost was a daughter... perhaps one around this age.

"It's okay. You're safe now."

As she carries her deeper into the tent, no doubt bound for a bath and a change of clothes that isn't flecked with her parents' blood, James and I follow.

He remains silent, but I broach the subject I know I must.

"Isabel, I've been talking with the King. We want to move you and the orphans to the palace so you'll be more comfortable. There will be lots of amenities and extra hands to help."

Isabel listens quietly, not responding immediately.

Instead I'm surprised to hear James inquire, "You mean, they won't be here much longer?"

"You'll be welcome to visit even after we move them. The palace isn't so far." I answer, earning myself a reproachful look from Isabel.

"Who will receive them here if we move?" She asks stiffly, clearly not liking the idea of change.

"Perhaps James could deliver any unaccompanied pups directly to the palace." I suggest slyly.

"That way you won't have to worry about them landing in anyone else's care, and he'll be confident he's delivered them into the safest possible hands." I pause, going very still as if she's waiting to hear the Guardian's thoughts on the matter before making her decision.

"I could do that." He agrees promptly.

"I mean, I'd like to, if it's alright with you."

Isabel nods without looking at him, and even though I know I'm dealing with two people who are hurting deeply, the hopeless romantic in me gets a thrill of excitement.

“Then it’s settled.” I decide, before either one of them can rethink it.

“Though there’s something else.” I add, pursing my lips.

Hearing my hesitance, Isabel turns her guarded features to me, clearly sensing bad news is coming.

“We don’t want to keep anyone in these awful camps. We want to bring them into the city and are going to be asking for volunteers to host different families.” Isabel’s eyes narrow again, and I know she sees where this is heading.

“I grew up as an orphan, Isabel.” I state abruptly, changing tactics.

“I was in a group home with a lot of problems. But even before things got bad, I can tell you that I spent my entire childhood wishing for a family of my own. These pups need someone like you to care for and look out for them, but there are a lot of families with love to give, a lot of parents who have lost their own children. I think the best thing we can do for them is to place them with fosters.”

She opens her mouth to object, and I hold up my hand.

“I would work with you to make sure only the best, most well-intentioned families are actually given pups, and that a system is in place to check in on their welfare. It wouldn’t all be at once either. As long as the war goes on, there will always be new pups coming in – as terrible as that is.”

I shift a bit closer to her, speaking in a very soft voice.

“And if there’s anyone that you are interested in fostering yourself... we can arrange that.”

Isabel’s eyes widen, and she clutches Sadie a bit tighter.

“You make a good point.” She concedes stiffly.

“But I don’t like it.”

“I understand.”

I concede, reaching out to stroke Sadie’s soft hair.

“But parenthood is doing the right thing for your pups, even when it hurts. I know you understand that better than anyone. And I’ll be here with you every step of the way.”

Isabel glances at James again, and I almost wonder if she's shy to speak in front of him, or if she might take some comfort in his steady presence.

"I won't give them to just anyone." She finally agrees.

"And I won't settle for anything but the best procedures."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise." I assure her, feeling my victory within reach.

"When do we move?" Isabel inquires, with solemn resignation.

"James, how would you feel about making your first trip to the palace this afternoon?" I ask, smiling at the big wolf.

"I know you've had a long day already but-"

"No," He interrupts, his eyes locked on Isabel.

"Of course I'll do it." Isabel nods, still not meeting his gaze, "I'll get the pups ready."

Chapter 173 – The Heart of the Pack

Ella

It takes me a while to drag myself away from the orphans once they're settled in the palace. I know I have about a thousand things to do, but seeing so many little ones in need of love and care is simply too much for me to resist. I stay for a few hours to help Isabel and James set up, glancing furtively in their direction every now and then to see how things are going.

Isabel is as standoffish with James as she is with me, but he's gentle and steady, not seeming to mind her cold demeanor.

Every now and then I find the she-wolf returning my glances, but there's a distinct tinge of jealousy in her observation. I can't blame her — in her shoes I'd probably hate me for being so happy too.

After a while she marches over to me, interrupting me as I make up cots for the pups.

"You should let us finish this. You must have more important things to do." I shrug.

"Actually this is about the time I'd usually be taking a nap."

I share, wondering if it was a mistake to reference my pregnancy or point out the easy comfort of my life, then hating the fact that it feels necessary to overanalyze my words this way. I've been through enough traumas to know that people walking on eggshells around you only makes things worse.

"Then go nap." Isabel instructs brusquely, gesturing towards my middle. "You need your rest and you won't have the luxury in a few months."

There's a strange undercurrent in her words, and I have the sense that she would give anything to go back to the sleepless nights and overwhelming days of being a new parent.

"If it's alright with you, I'd like to stay." I reply simply, fluffing a pillow before tucking it under the soft blankets of my current cot.

"I was thinking the pups might like to make this space their own. We could build a fort or —"

"They aren't your practice dolls." Isabel cuts in, her hands on her hips.

"They're real pups who are hurting badly, they need comfort and safety right now. Getting attached to another adult who's just going to disappear as soon as she has her own pup

to cuddle, isn't going to help them."

Taking a deep breath, I carefully consider my next words before speaking.

"I don't need practice, Isabel. I've been raising babies since I was one myself — children who, like these pups, have lost everything and need all the support they can get. Now I can't promise that I'll always have time to give — whether it's because of the war or physical distance or whatever else might happen. But I can tell you that my son's arrival isn't going to make me forget about these children, I'm here because I care and I want to help." I pause, studying the other woman closely.

"And I might not be a mother yet, but that doesn't mean I have no wisdom to share." Isabel's mouth twitches, dangerously close to a quiver.

"Well you are wrong about one thing." She answers stiffly, turning her nose up. "You're already a mother...more of one than I am, at least."

I want to hug her so badly that it takes all my strength to hold back, but I know she won't welcome it.

Isabel has so many walls up at the moment she'd probably bite me just for trying. She starts to turn away, but I raise my voice, imbuing it with some of my newfound alpha female authority.

"Once a mother, always a mother. Your love for your child doesn't end with their life, Isabel."

She freezes, stopping dead in her tracks. She doesn't turn back or say a word, but I see her shoulders cave and her head hang.

Isabel retreats into the bedroom we arranged for her, and a minute later I hear her muffled sobs floating through the door. James appears at my side, with the helpless expression of an alpha faced with a crying she-wolf.

"What happened?" There's a note of accusation in his voice, and I realize just how quickly he's bonded with the grieving mother. "She'll tell you her story when she's ready."

I answer, the palpable anguish of her cries making me want to weep myself. "She's a stubborn one, and she's hurting. You'll need to give her time."

James looks at me sharply, and I can sense his wolf's agitation. "This isn't something I can fix, is it?" I almost want to smile, but I'm still aching for the other woman.

“No.” I murmur gently, “nothing can ever fix this. But if you can get past her teeth and claws, you might be able to give her a shoulder to cry on.” He looks at me uncertainly.

“You don’t think it’s too soon?” I shake my head. “It’s never too soon for a hug when someone is suffering.” James sets his shoulder with the expression of a warrior going into battle, then marches determinedly towards Isabel’s room.

The door closes behind him, but I can still hear Isabel’s outraged snarls and a small scuffle before James rumbles a dominant growl.

Then there’s stillness, and a piteous moan. Isabel’s keening grows louder then, no longer dampened by her efforts to hold in the pain or muffled by prideful attempts to stay quiet.

Her sobs are soon joined by purrs, and suddenly I’m so glad that I stayed here with our people that it’s staggering.

It was a very small thing, I know, but I can’t help but feel as if this is right. These orphans, the refugees, need someone to look out for them, and I can help but think I’m the person for the job.

Suddenly I remember what Sinclair told me about Lunas being the heart of a pack, and then Henry’s explanation about my role inspiring the Alphas at the summit.

A torrent of guilt rains down on my senses as I realize just how badly I messed up with Sinclair.

Not only was he right about me staying behind in the capital, but we never even got to discuss all the reasons why it’s important, because I shut him out.

I’m so ashamed of myself A little while later I find Roger in the palace kitchens. “What are you doing here?” I ask, good naturedly, taking a seat beside him at one of the work tables.

“I’m scheming.”

He reports slyly. “Cora ran off the other day before she was able to eat the ice cream she ordered, so the pastry chef is going to help me by making some fresh.”

He looks so pleased with himself that I have to laugh despite my gloomy mood. “Oh she’s going to be furious.”

“Bad idea?” Roger asks, apparently having second thoughts now. “No, good idea. That’s why she’s going to be pissed.” I explain.

"She loves ice cream and if she finds the strength to resist she'll be grumpy because she won't get to enjoy it, and if she gives in she'll resent you for making her happy." Roger chuckles darkly.

"Excellent." He smirks, looking at me curiously. "You don't mind? My interest in her, I mean?"

"No," I share honestly. "Actually I think you two might be good together, but you've got your work cut out for you." "Don't I know it."

Roger agrees, not sounding the least bit bothered by this prospect.

"Of course, if you hurt her I'll rip your arms off and beat you with them until you're dead from blood loss or blunt force trauma." I add smoothly, in a perfectly serious tone.

"I would expect nothing less." He nods, solemnly adding. "But I have no intention of hurting her, Ella." "Good." I reply shortly, my eyes exploring the room for food options.

"And you?" Roger inquires, watching my curious exploration. "Afternoon snack? Pregnancy craving?" "Actually I got busy and skipped lunch." I confess, my stomach growling right on cue. "Ooh, I'm gonna tell on you."

Roger teases, sounding like a child on a playground. "Dominic would not approve." My jaw drops, "hey, I just gave you my blessing to date my sister and this is how you repay my kindness?"

I object, narrowing my eyes when he continues to grin. "You're gonna be in so much trouble!" He jibes, not letting up. "You are such a tattletale!" I accuse, swatting his arm. "Haven't you ever heard that snitches get stitches?"

"Yeah but somehow I don't think you're the type to stab a man for ratting you out."

He assesses, pinching my cheek. "You're too sweet." I shove his hand away, my shame and guilt rising to the surface as his words sink in.

"I'm not."

I sigh forlornly.

"I can be a real brat."

"Why do you say that?"

Roger inquires, ceasing his teasing in light of my dour mood. "Oh, I've just been a really shitty mate to Dominic lately." I confess.

"I made his job a lot harder because I didn't get my way, and I've done some really hypocritical things too. I'm currently working up the courage to call him and apologize."

"Well the good news is that you don't need much courage. You know he'll always forgive you."

Roger tells me confidently. "I mean, yes, the logical adult part of my brain knows that."

I agree, "but the scared little orphan in me still associates admitting difficult truths or bad behavior with danger. She expects one wrong word to flip a switch and make him stop loving me."

"Well you tell that orphan to shut up, because that's not your life anymore, Ella." Roger instructs me firmly.

"She doesn't know what she's talking about. My brother loves you more than anything."

"Thank you." I answer, shaking my head.

"This has been a really odd time for me. I really thought I understood all the ways my baggage messes with my head, but it's like facing the bad things in my past created all these new ways for them to manifest."

"I get that." Roger expresses.

"When I finally acknowledged that Dominic wasn't the monster I'd made him out to be, I thought I would turn over a whole new leaf and everything would be easier. I thought it was the end, instead it was the beginning. Facing the truth of what happened isn't the hard part, it's all the fallout afterwards."

"I'm learning exactly that." I confirm, "and now I have to go deal with it."

Roger squeezes my hand.

"Good luck."

Chapter 174 – Ella Apologizes

Ella

After my snack, I meet with the chefs to talk about menus for the summit, then ask to have dinner sent up to my rooms. I'm feeling too pensive and tired to be social tonight.

I'm still reeling from discovering how badly I handled my troubles with Sinclair, and I'm both dreading and eager to make amends. I know I won't feel better until I do, but the prospect is more than a little daunting. I'm too much of a chicken to call him on the phone, and I don't know where he is or what he's doing right now anyway. So I decide to wait for our dreams, where I'll be able to feel his touch and let my wolf take over if things get too hard. I know Sinclair probably won't be asleep for hours, but it was a long, emotionally draining day.

So as much as I want to put off our meeting I take a quick shower and climb into my nest.

It smells like Sinclair, and that blessed comfort is enough to whisk me off into my dreams.

When I arrive in the dream forest I have nothing but time to kill, and I spend it thinking about what I want to say to Sinclair when he appears.

Of course, the more I think about my mistakes, the worse I feel, and soon I'm fighting the urge to cry.

When my mate finally takes shape in the distant trees, I feel a deep pang in my chest. I can't bring myself to look at him. I kneel at the foot of the bed, my hands resting on either side of my belly as I stare at my lap. I can perfectly picture his handsome face, rugged lines and bronze skin practically glowing in the light of the moon, his blazing wolf eyes piercing me through the darkness.

"Hello trouble."

Sinclair's deep voice wraps around me like a warm embrace, and I can see his black-clad legs just in front of me.

Strong fingers catch my chin, and then he's tilting my face up to his. He searches my features with lethal intensity, and his voice is husky when he speaks.

"What, no smile?" He asks, running his thumb over my lower lip, his longer fingers splayed across my cheek and delving into my hair.

"If I didn't know any better I'd think you weren't happy to see me."

I can feel his wolf prodding at our bond, trying to tempt my own inner animal to rise to the surface.

“What is it, little wolf? Talk to me.”

“I owe you an apology.” I admit, wide eyed and trying to stop my voice from quavering.

“Already?” He inquires, the corner of his lip twitching upward.

“I’ve only been gone a day, how much mischief could you possibly have made? Other than skipping lunch of course.” My jaw drops, and in my surprise and outrage, I forget some of my shyness.

“He actually told you?! That rat!” Sinclair chuckles, stroking my hair back from my face.

“You missed our bedtime call, so I checked with Roger. He explained that you’d had along day and probably went to bed early.”

A new stab of guilt assails me.

“I forgot.”

I bury my face in my hands, “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking. I just didn’t get a chance to nap and I was sleepy and the nest smelled like you and —”

“Ella,” Sinclair pulls my hands away from my face, his brow furrowed with concern now.

“Baby, it’s okay.”

“No it’s not.” I insist, furious with myself now.

“I keep letting you down, you’re always there for me and every time you need me to be there for you, I fuck it up.”

My words are met with a deep growl, and I know Sinclair is warning me to stop this, but I can’t help myself.

I forge on, my voice thick, “I’ve been such a horrible brat to you.

You’ve got the whole world on your plate and you were still thinking of me every step of the way — figuring out how to best use my talents while also looking out for the pack and keeping us safe.

All I did was give you a hard time for being stressed and then run away when things got hard!"

I'm on my feet now, pacing back and forth while the huge Alpha patiently waits out the storm, watching me with the bearing of a wolf about to pounce, his hands in fists at his sides as he glowers down at me.

"When we started out I gave you so much flack about communicating with me, but when you tried I refused to listen because I didn't like what you were saying. I wasted our time together and whined and complained — and even now I can tell you're pissed that I'm being hard on myself and you're getting ready to comfort me and tell me I'm wrong and I won't have it, Dominic!" I command, pointing my index finger at him sharply.

"I deserve your anger, I deserve to be held accountable and I'm not going to let you smooth this over because I'm breeding or new to being a wolf! Yell at me, or walk out on me, tell me I'm a spoiled hypocrite — anything!"

I'm breathing hard and near tears, my emotions swirling out of control. I'm prepared for the worst, and I even welcome it, anything to ease my guilt.

However Sinclair simply crosses his arms over his chest, his expression dark and foreboding.

For a minute I don't think he's going to speak to me, but then he rumbles, "Get on the bed, Ella."

I blink, taken aback by his stark command.

"Why?"

My mate arches a menacing brow, one which has me scampering onto the plush blankets.

When I'm kneeling in front of him again, he steps forward, and I don't need to tap into our bond to feel his disapproval. It rolls off him in waves.

"Who is in charge here, mate?"

I shudder at the pure dominance in his voice.

He lets his alpha power flow out of him freely, and maybe for the first time, I feel the full force of his strength.

I'm confronted with the reality of exactly how much magic courses through his veins, the

reason why all the other wolves on the continent were prepared to bow down to him.

I've always known he was strong and fierce, I've always understood that he's clever and kind, but before now I never quite realized how much more raw power he possesses than everyone else.

I'm also astounded to realize how much control he must employ every second of every day in order to keep it in check, to stop it from coming out this way and terrifying everyone he meets.

A moment ago I might have challenged him, but now I have no option but to submit.

"You are." I answer meekly.

He nods, not showing me any mercy.

"And who decides how I feel? Who gets to choose whether or not I'm angry?"

"you do?" I squeak, my wolf squirming with the desperation to cease the onslaught of his power.

She's on her back, belly up with her tail between her legs, but still Sinclair does not relent. His clenched jaw twitches dangerously.

"And who gets to tell me how to deal with my mate?"

"Well technically your wo— no one!"

I cut off my defiant response when Sinclair unleashes yet another wall of power, disproving my earlier assumption that I was feeling all of it.

"That's right, little wolf."

Sinclair affirms, finally uncrossing his arms so he can grip my nape.

"On all counts."

He growls wordlessly, and I shiver in his hands.

"You may be feeling guilty, and if you ask me nicely, I can help you work through those feelings. But you do not get to tell me how to feel about you or our relationship."

"I'm sorry." I sniffle.

"This was all supposed to be an apology, I just got so upset when I realized I -missed our call."

"You don't say?"

Sinclair intones sardonically, his thumb brushing up and down on the side of my neck.

"Now, would you like to try your apology over?"

I nod, amazed when I realize how much steadier I feel now that he's taken me in hand.

"I'm sorry that I didn't talk with you, especially after making such a big deal about communication. I'm sorry that I ran away, and that I've been self-involved and unsupportive. I'm sorry for lashing out when I knew your heart was in the right place."

"And?" Sinclair prompts me ominously.

"And I'm sorry that I lost my temper and yelled at you and tried to tell you how to feel and how to treat me."

"And?" He says again, still radiating with an overwhelming amount of strength.

I rack my brain, trying to figure out what I'm forgetting.

Sensing my confusion, his wolf's voice sounds in my head.

Food and rest, sweet mate.

"I'm sorry I didn't take care of myself today."

I add at last, feeling a huge weight fall from my shoulders now that everything is out in the open.

"Good girl."

Sinclair praises, and my wolf preens happily.

"Now I'm going to tell you some things you're not going to like, but you're just going to have to deal with it." He warns, pulling back on his overwhelming power at last, and I'm surprised to find I miss it.

"You haven't let me down, Ella And I'm not angry."

We're in an unimaginable situation here, and despite what you may think, you have supported me and comforted and inspired me in a hundred different ways since we arrived, and that is not up for debate." I nod, understanding that he needs me to accept this without complaint.

Sinclair sends a rush of genuine emotion through the bond, reassuring me that he's not only saying these things to placate me, but that he actually feels them.

"Now, if you don't mind, today was the longest fucking day of my life, and I haven't even gotten to kiss you yet."

Feeling a bit more centered and brave now, I peek up at him from beneath my lashes.

"And if I do mind?"

Sinclair chuckles, flashing his fangs, as he leans in anyway.

The moment before his mouth crashes into mine and heat explodes through every inch of my body, I hear his sensual purr.

"Too damn bad."

Chapter 175 – Guilt

Ella

“It’s all right, Ella.”

The first priest says, approaching me as one might a skittish horse — with slow, measured movements and hands exposed to show he holds no weapon. “We only want to protect you.”

“Protect me from what?” I question shakily, my back flush against the locked door. “You have a very powerful magic inside you, and if it’s allowed to come out you’ll be exposed. We can’t let that happen.” He explains, using a tone much too gentle to be trustworthy.

It’s as though he’s trying to trick me, to convince me he’s kind when he truly intends malice. “I don’t have any magic.” I insist, wishing that I did.

Maybe if I was magic I might be able to put a stop to the things happening here — to protect the others without bringing harm to myself. I was so preoccupied with this statement that I almost missed the second piece of information. “Exposed to what?”

“You do, it just hasn’t shown itself yet.” The second priest sighs, keeping his distance but watching me with sharp eyes.

“At least not in ways you understand. Tell me, have you never noticed how much stronger you are than your peers? That you can hear and smell things from much greater distances? That you can run faster, jump higher, suffer greater injuries with less pain?”

He inquires, his hawkish gaze searing into me, “do they not follow you? Gravitate to your side and obey you as a leader?”

My head spins, making me dizzy with the possibilities. He guesses correctly, but that can’t be because I have some sort of special power. It’s just the way things are... isn’t it? “And exposed to a world you cannot yet join.”

The first man adds. “It must happen when the time is right – but that time is a very long way off.”

“I don’t understand.”

I squeak, a sense of pure dread settling in the pit of my stomach. “We know, Ella.” The second man proclaims, “And I’m sorry that this must happen, it will not be pleasant, but it is necessary for the future of our people.” I shake my head, fighting back tears.

Their words are triggering every alarm bell in my young mind. I know what men do to little girls under the guise of necessity, the pretense of helping or protecting.

And I know exactly how unpleasant things can get. My blood runs cold, and my pulse races, triggering a strange new energy deep in my bones.

It pulses through me like a bolt of electricity, a wild thing writhes just beneath my skin, feral and rabid — begging to be free. “No, go away!” I hiss, my body shuddering with these new sensations. The men look at each other with grim determination. “Her timing was spot on — another week and we’d be too late.”

“I’m sorry, child.” The first priest professes gravely, closing the distance between us. “We would not do this if there was another way.”

Raw terror, unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before, takes over my senses. My instincts are screaming at me to run, to get away at any cost.

They tell me that whatever these men intend will be far worse than anything the doctor or dormitory matron have ever inflicted on me. But there isn’t anywhere to run.

I’ve got a bolted door at my back and two attackers far larger and stronger than I am bearing down on me. I try to scream, but the second priest clamps his hand over my mouth before the sound can escape.

I sink my teeth into his palm, but he doesn’t even flinch. He simply wrenches me away from the door, propelling me further into the room.

The first man grabs my legs, and I’m lifted off the ground. I thrash violently against their hold, my screams muffled and garbled as the priest continues to smother me.

His blood seeps into my mouth, the metallic tang fanning the flames in my already sour stomach. My gorge rises, and I’m gagging, fighting for air and struggling to focus on my escape.

I don’t know what to do or how to fight them — I’m powerless in their strong grips, and they seem completely unaffected by my attacks. I might as well be a feather swaying in the wind for all the effort they expend to contain me.

A distant keening pierces the air, sounding very far away. The cries are deeper than my own, thick with grief and pain more complex than the sheer fright in my own panicked screams. “Leon,” A deep voice, tinged with concern, joins the terrible sounds. “It’s too much.”

“Just a little more.”

A second voice, floating above me, replies.

“We’re so close.” I have no idea where these sounds are coming from, and the priests don’t seem to hear them at all. They continue with their task with single-minded focus, and I’m nothing more than a pawn in their game — tiny and helpless to stop them.

I’m thrust onto the floor and pinned down. The first priest restrains my wrists while the other sits on my kicking legs, pulling his tool bag to his side.

He extracts a shimmering silk cloth, its pearlescent sheen glimmering like moonlight, glowing in the darkness.

It looks soft and airy, but when they begin wrapping it around my body, it tightens around me with the unyielding force of steel. They enclose me in the fabric, winding it round and round like a glittering cocoon.

Once my arms are locked against my sides and my legs tightly shut, I’m completely immobile.

I can’t move a muscle in the fabric’s punishing grip, and soon they’re wrapping my head, as if they intend to mummify me alive.

Just before the silk falls over my mouth, the priest finally removes his hand from my mouth.

A half second of my scream escapes before the moonlight closes over my gaping lips, locking my face into the contours of a silent scream.

I’m able to breathe, though I don’t understand how. It’s one of my nightmares come to life – my mind is awake but I’m trapped in my own body, unable to move or speak.

I can only lie there motionless, my brain screaming at my nerve endings and muscles to move, to do something – anything! But nothing happens because this isn’t a dream from which I can wake, this is real, and it’s only the beginning.

I can hear the priests rummaging around outside the walls of my silken prison, and I strain to identify the sounds: the clink of glass? The jostling of beads? A bottle uncorking? For all the fabric’s strength, it does not stop me from feeling or smelling.

My nose is filled with some pungent, herbaceous fragrance a moment before drops of moisture seep through the silk and onto my skin.

Light objects are laid over my body, stones or crystals placed in deliberate patterns on my head, chest, arms and legs.

I'm still desperately trying to fight the cocoon, that foreign electricity in my veins warning me that I won't be able to fight much longer. Somehow, I know I'm running out of time, but I refuse to give up hope for escape.

The priests begin to chant then, speaking a language I do not recognize. Their words swirl around the small room, carrying arcane power older than the world itself.

There was only darkness a moment ago, but now blinding light explodes in my vision, blinding me – but I can't close my eyes against it. The light is so searing that pain stabs in my head, and I'm sure I'll never see again.

Soon I realize that the light is the least of my worries. Fire is traveling along the inside of the fabric — but the silk does not burn, only I do.

It blazes so hot that I'm sure any tears lingering on my cheeks will evaporate on the spot, I can feel my skin blistering, bursting until the flames can move on to charring my flesh and muscles. I'm dying...

I'm sure of it. I'm dying and I'm not going to escape. There won't be anyone left to protect Cora and the other children, they'll be alone and defenseless.

That same wild energy surges forward, and the priests lose their rhythm momentarily, their chant stuttering before regaining its droning force. I try to send another surge, but something is tearing inside of me, more painful even than the flames. "Leon, I'm serious now, bring her out."

The man is angry now, furious. And the woman is still screaming, her voice hoarse with the effort. "We know what they did, it's time to stop. She can't take any more."

"I'll get the antidote."

The second voice agrees. I'm breaking, unraveling, and with a violent wrench my soul is ripped in two. The pain disappears, the light goes dim, but my chest feels hollow.

There is no more power pulsing through my veins, and only now that it's gone can I recognize that it was there in the first place. I've lost something sacred and integral to my being, though I don't know what. I simply know I am no longer whole. The priests speak softly as they unwrap me, "She was stronger than I expected...remarkable really."

My face is uncovered, and though I was certain I'd been burnt to a crisp, I feel cold air

against my tearstained skin, though I no longer have the will to cry. I stare blankly at the ceiling above me, until one of the withered faces moves into my line of sight. "It's all over now."

The priest assures me, sounding regretful. "We'll take away the memory too. You won't have to remember this, little one." His face blurs as a needle pinches my arm, and I return to the present.

Chapter 176 — Hypnosis

Ella

"I don't want to wake up ." I complain, still snuggled beneath the covers of my dream bed with Sinclair.

"I know, but the sooner we do and get back to work, the sooner we can be reunited." Sinclair replies, sounding every bit as reluctant as I feel.

"Meet me again tonight?" I request, wondering how I'll ever force myself to untangle my limbs from his.

True to his promise, my mate had freed me of my guilt and helped me forgive myself, just not in the way I expected. I got to give him plenty of pleasure, but unleashing all of his Alpha power was like experiencing his wolf on steroids. He was so wild and feral, practically rabid with lust, and my wolf responded like a complete wanton. I imagine it's what being in heat will feel like after the baby comes, and the entire night passed in a blurry haze. My body is sore and aching from my mate's dominant treatment, but my heart is light and my conscience is clear.

"wild horses couldn't stop me." Sinclair promises, still bathing me in the glow of his astounding magic.

"We'll of course not." I joke, "your wolf is the size of a bloody horse already and he's got built in knives on his fingers and toes."

Sinclair laughs, petting my hip. "Fine, an army of vampires couldn't stop me." He amends.

I pause, "wait, are vampires real too?"

"No." Sinclair smiles, without judgment. He pauses then, seeming to be listening for something. "I think I'm waking up. Be good today, little mate. No skipped meals or forgotten naps."

"I'll be good as long as you stay safe." I agree, thinking I might cry and then feeling ridiculous for being so emotional over such a short time apart.

Sinclair rumbles wordlessly, but he seems to sense my words came from a place of vulnerability, so he doesn't chastise me. Instead he waits for me to look up at him again, "and please talk to Gabriel about investigating your past, the longer we put it off the more you'll dread it, sweetheart."

I nod in reluctant confirmation, "I'll make some time."

Sinclair simply kisses me, pouring all his love through our bond, and then he's gone.

I wake up a short time later, the wonderful, airy emotions from my dream turned bittersweet by my mate's absence. I scarf down my breakfast and throw myself into making arrangements for the summit, before visiting the orphans and departing for the refugee arrivals camp. When I arrive, I'm surprised to discover that my sister is already present, anxiously looking on as the Vanaran doctors treat injured shifters. She's so consumed in the events in the medical tent that she doesn't even notice me approaching beside her. When I place a gentle hand on her arm she leaps a foot into the air, yelping in surprise.

"Ella, you scared me." She breathes, pressing her hand to her breast.

"Dm sorry." I profess, giving her an apologetic squeeze. I follow her gaze to a surgeon setting a broken bone, placing the injured arm into a strange machine, which automatically projects a light image of the woman's skeleton, like a portable x-ray which requires no radiation. As we watch, the machine carefully bends and shifts the limb until the bones are lined up properly, and the shifter only emits a low hiss, making me think it must be a relatively pain-free process. "Admiring the Vanaran technology?"

I inquire, feeling amazed myself.

"It's so far ahead of anything we have back home, even in the shifter community." She shares, shaking her head. "These packs have a lot they could be teaching the rest of the world — a lot of good they might be doing. Instead they keep it to themselves."

"I can't blame them for hiding." I reply, "you know how humans are with people they don't know or understand. If they found out about wolves we'd have a witch trial reboot on our hands."

"But wolves aren't some marginalized group." Cora answers, "they are the ones holding the power. Yes, humans would be afraid and all the bigots in the world would probably demonize them the way they do with everyone who's different, but they'd be punching up. Shifters are the Goliath to their David, not the other way around."

"Humans outnumber wolves four to one." I remind her. "Yes, we might have strength and technology on our side, but I think it's a mistake to forget how much damage humans can do when they set their minds to it."

Cora looks at me with an unreadable expression now, and I'm surprised to find a gulf between us. Our relationship didn't change when we found out I'm a shifter, but in this discussion we're suddenly separated by our identities. "On our side?" She repeats, her brow furrowing. "You mean your side. Have you forgotten, sister, that I'm one of the

hateful humans you' re talking about?"

"I didn't mean it that way." I sigh, replaying my words in my mind and realizing how cold they must have sounded.

"You were a human for thirty years Ella, and you've been a wolf for less than a month. I thought your allegiance was stronger than that." Cora remarks, "You're so concerned for all these displaced shifters, for your pack.. have you even thought about how this war is affecting the humans on the continent? They're suffering the same violence and instability, but unlike us, they don't have any idea why it's happening or where it's coming from. It must just seem as though the world's gone mad." thuy Her chocolate eyes shine in the fluorescent lights.

"And they don't have anywhere to run, there is no magical continent to offer them refuge."

My heart sinks as I realize she's right. I've been concerned for everyone left behind, but until this moment I hadn't given any specific thought to the humans. The shame I so recently banished comes back to strike at me full force. Where are all the humans I once knew? The children I nannied? Are they even alive?

"I'm sorry." I choke, "You're right. I've gotten so caught up in my own life these last couple of weeks... in trying to figure out where I came from, that I forgot the people who took me in when the shifters abandoned me."

"Well, if anyone has an excuse to be a bit self absorbed right now, it's you." Cora appeases begrudgingly. "And I'm probably just taking out my frustration on you, which isn't fair."

"No, you were right." I insist. "I have to think about the humans too, Sinclair might already be monitoring the situation or planning things, but if he isn't, I'll make sure we start." I decide, thinking aloud. Almost as an afterthought, I add, "Frustration with what?"

It's possible she was referring to Roger's advances, but then it's also possible that I've been an even more negligent sister than I realized.

"Ella, my whole world got blown up too." Cora scoffs, sounding annoyed. "My job, my home, everything I knew is gone. And now I'm here like some sort of third wheel to you and the refugees — an interloper with no rightful place or role. I can't even practice medicine here because they' re living in the fucking space age."

My eyes fall shut, a heap of guilt joining my shame. "Cora, I should have realized. I'm really sorry, and I know I keep saying that but it's the truth. I feel terrible." I take her hand in mine, half afraid she'll reject it.

“We’ll find you a role. Maybe it can be helping with the efforts to support humans back home, or maybe you can help here.” I suggest, gesturing to the medical tent.

“You were just saying how much we have to learn from the Vanarans. Well, this is a chance. Just because you don’t know this technology yet doesn’t Mean you can’t be trained. You have all the medical knowledge, this is just new methodology right?”

“Well yes and no, because they probably understand things about disease and physiology that we haven’t figured out yet, but... I would love to learn.” Cora shares wistfully. “The science nerd in me is geeking out already and I don’t even know the tip of the iceberg. Do you really think I could find an apprenticeship or something here?”

“If they try to say no I’ll just sick Dominic on them.” I promise, proud and pleased to see my sister so excited. “We’ll make it happen.”

She hugs me tightly, and slips a little bit closer to the procedure happening in the medical tent. I retreat gradually feeling anew weight on my overburdened shoulders. “Something on your mind?” Gabriel inquires, entering the room for his own daily visit to the camp.

“You know when you think you have a handle on your to-do list, and then 8 thousand new things pop up that you should have already accounted for but didn’t because you were too stressed or too preoccupied with your other tasks?” thuy I ask, exhaling with exhaustion.

“yes.” He chuckles. “Anything I can help with?”

I set my hands on my hips, working up my courage. “Well, I’d probably prefer to have your help on some of the things I was just talking about with my sister, but I know I should really be asking about DNA and hypnotists.”

He nods in understanding, looping an arm around my shoulder. “ I’ll tell you what, why don’t we go back to the palace and get my royal physician to run some tests for you. I’ll call in the hypnotherapist, and in the meantime, we can talk about the things you’d rather focus on.”

I hang my head, really not wanting to do this. “Deal.”

Chapter 177 – Hypnosis

Ella

“Hello Ella, I’m Leon.” I’m staring skeptically at the strange man, not trusting this one bit. He doesn’t bat an eye and only continues as if I’m not watching him like a wary rabbit preparing to bolt.”

King Gabriel tells me you’re in the market for a hypno-therapist.”

I don’t respond, still sizing him up. I’ve never liked doctors and with good reason, but after learning that the OBGYN who prompted me to go to the sperm bank turned out to be a fraud, I find myself even more suspicious of anyone in the field than usual. Frankly, the idea of laying back and closing my eyes while some stranger delves into my deepest, darkest memories makes me feel sick to my stomach. If my mate were here it might be different, he would provide me with the sense of safety I need to let my guard down, but he isn’t here and my wolf is very on edge. A low growl slips out of my mouth, and I feel my lips curling back to bare my fangs.

Leon shoots a nervous glance at Gabriel, who seems entirely unphased. He gestures for the therapist to continue, so Leon forges on, “I understand that hypnosis can seem very daunting.” Leon acknowledges, “we’re searching understand that hypnosis can seem very daunting.” Leon acknowledges, “we’re searching for things your mind has hidden from you for your own protection, but I assure you that I’ve been doing this for a very long time and you’re in good hands. I will help you through every step of the process, and I’ll be able to pull you out of the dream state if it becomes overwhelming. You can have someone stay with you through the process if you like, but you need to make sure it’s someone with whom you are comfortable sharing these memories.”

“Like you?” I scoff, knowing I’m being unnecessarily rude but not caring. “A random man off the street who has done nothing to earn my trust but expects me to lay myself emotionally bare at your whim?”

Gabriel opens his mouth to speak, but Leon holds up a staying hand to the King. “It’s okay, she’s exactly right. Normally we would be doing this as part of a much broader therapy regimen where we would have the space and time to form a bond of trust. I would be concerned if you didn’t feel anxious about this, Ella, but I also know that time is a luxury we don’t have.”

“How about I go get Cora? I’m sure she’d be happy to stay with you.” Gabriel suggests, intentionally making his voice low and soothing.

“I want Dominic.” I answer sharply, my arms wrapped defensively around my body.

Gabriel sighs, “I know, but he isn’t here, Ella. You’re going to have to pick someone

else.”

My lip quivers dangerously, and for a second I'm furious with Sinclair for leaving me to do this alone. A moment later I'm kicking myself for being so selfish, and tears well in my eyes. I blink them away, hating my weakness. We could just attack him. My wolf suggests slyly. He doesn't look so tough, I bet we could take him. There can't be hypnosis without a hypnotist.

You make a good point. I answer, truly liking her idea and marveling at my own bloodlust. I never contemplated attacking anyone before all this started, and now I'm practically salivating at the idea of pouncing on the unsuspecting therapist. Of course, a moment later I imagine having to tell Sinclair that I bit the hypnotist Gabriel generously vetted for us, and I put the idea to bed. We can't. I tell her reluctantly. Dominic would be disappointed.

Fine. She grumbles, but I can still feel her violent inclinations pulsing through my blood, sparking my adrenaline and making my heart race. “Ella?”

Gabriel prompts, a note of warning in his tone. I think he can sense the direction of my thoughts, but I send him a withering glare.

“Henry.” I decide, “If he's free and willing.” The King had been right in assuming that I would feel the most comfortable with Cora if I can't have my mate, but I'm painfully aware of the possibility that this session might bring up horrors from our childhood that I don't want her to have to hear or relive.

Gabriel doesn't move. “If I leave you alone here, are you going to try to harm Leon?”

Now there's a thought. My wolf pipes up. If Gabriel isn't here then we could get rid of him before King Nosey gets back, and then there wouldn't be anything to tattle to Dominic about. Nobody, no crime.

I don't know.” I answer, turning my nose up. “Why don't you try and find out.”

“I send a guard.” The King chooses wisely, giving me a scolding stare.

“Why don't you have a seat, Ella.” Leon advises, seeming entirely unfazed by my aggression. Then again, I suppose he's used to shifters' battling their wolves' base instincts.

A little while later, I'm stretched out on the couch with one hand on my belly and the other clasped in Henry's large hand. “Don't worry, Ella. I've got you.” He tells me warmly. “If he puts one foot out of line I'll sick my guards on him.”

“Thank you.” I reply, squeezing his hand. “Will you wake me if you do? I want to watch.”

“Of course.” Henry chuckles, reminding me so much of Sinclair that my heart aches. My mate might not let me lash out at an innocent man unprovoked, but he would certainly take equal pleasure in vanquishing one who crossed me.

“You two are being ridiculous.” Gabriel mutters under his breath.

“Hey, I’m pregnant!” I remind him, thoroughly affronted.

“And I’m disabled.” Henry adds, in an equally offended tone that has me smothering a giggle.

“Neither one of those conditions excuse you from being irrational.” Gabriel declares.
“Leon is here to help.”

Henry and I exchange a mutinous glance, silently agreeing to have the guards take out the King as well, should Leon cross a line. I can practically hear Gabriel rolling his eyes, but Leon quickly takes control. “Okay, so what I’m hearing is a lot of anxiety about this process, and that’s okay.” He announces inanely. “Ella, I’m going to tell you how this works so you know what to expect. First I’m going to give you a very small injection of a drug called Ether. It’s going to help you relax and open your mind, breaking down the barriers of thought that often lock certain memories or sensations away from your consciousness. It’s completely safe – you can compare it to human psychedelic-guided therapies if you like.”

I can hear him opening plastic packaging, and my fear spirals a bit. No one said anything about an injection. I’m fine with needles, but my distrust of this man makes my wolf recoil at the thought of him putting something unknown into my body.

Maybe I should have asked for Cora after all, since she has medical knowledge I don’t.
“It’s okay Ella.”

Henry says softly, clearly reading my resurgence of anxiety. “It’s a common drug in Vanara people use it recreationally too and there’s no danger.”

“Exactly.” Leon confirms. “I’ll check in with you continuously as it kicks in, and then we’re just going to talk. I’ll ask you about your earliest memories, to tell me about your life growing up. I won’t be controlling you or manipulating you in any way, just guiding you through your memories with the help of the Ether. If it gets to be too much, I have another injection that can counteract the first. Otherwise, we’ll let the drug takes its course.

Afterwards, we’ll talk about everything that happened and talk about any tools to help

you process your feelings. We'll go over things we didn't get to, challenges, things to focus on next time." He concludes as I watch him finish preparing the shot out of the corner of my eye.

We'll be working together the whole way. Henry will be taking care of you and also helping me gauge your reactions and mental state since he knows you better. How does that sound?"

Terrible. Not Fun. Bad. Stop this! I think miserably.

This quack doesn't understand what remembering my life growing up will be like. He doesn't realize that even simple questions are painful or difficult for me to answer because of how fucked up things were. But I promised my mate, and we need to know where I came from. Still, with all the horrible things I do remember, I don't even want to imagine how bad something would have had to be for me to repress it. "Is there a chance that we won't find anything? That there isn't anything I've blocked out?" I inquire, even though I know myself well enough to realize there probably are. I shut out all the bad memories for two decades, so I probably shut out memories too.

"There is." Leon confirms, "But in my experience, you always learn something new about yourself through this process. Your brain connects the dots of things you already knew in new ways, or allows you to drill down on realizations about your life or experiences. Therapy is always a journey, so I can't predict what we'll find, but I can tell you that you will be changed by the end of it."

I draw in a shaky gulp of air, and I can almost hear Sinclair's voice in my mind. You can do this.

You're stronger than you know, little wolf.

Clamping my eyes shut, I nod to Gabriel, prompting him and the guards to leave us alone. "

Chapter 178 – Visitors

Ella

I've never really done drugs. I experimented in college like most people, and I've partaken at a few parties over the years, but nothing in my limited experience prepared me for the ether. As soon as Leon injects it, I immediately feel it taking control.

The room around me becomes sharper and more blurred, the walls seeming to vibrate with energy. I close my eyes against the strange visual stimuli, and a kaleidoscope of color explodes to life against my eyelids, filling the black void with light. I feel lighter than air, oddly euphoric, and my already sharp wolf senses become even more vivid. In some ways my body feels very far away, yet in others, I can't help but revel in the feeling of the sofa's cloth against my skin, or the new notes I detect in the distant chime of bells in the city.

"How are you feeling, Ella?" Leon inquires, and even his voice sounds different, deeper and more complex.

"High." I admit honestly, peeking my eyes open again and marveling at the way the painting on the wall in front of me seems to be moving.

"That's normal." Leon says, nodding. "Is it a relaxed high or an overwhelming one?"

I pause before answering, feeling as though my brain is on a delay. "It's a little overwhelming." I admit, checking in on the corner of my mind inhabited by my wolf. She's sprawling peacefully, free of the aggression and anxiety that consumed her a few minutes ago. Instead her tongue rolls from her mouth as she stretches and enjoys the sensations flowing through us, even rolling over and rubbing herself against the ground.

I don't need any explanation for my wolf's behavior, because I feel the same languid comfort and ease. My thoughts are quiet, but my body is buzzing with sensation. I snuggle deeper into the cushions, wishing I was in my nest. I consider asking to move – everything there is so much softer and nicer – but somewhere in the back of my head I'm aware that this wondrous state of mind is probably going to be undone by the therapy ahead. I don't want to ruin my safe space by letting something bad happen there. Still, I'm so busy thinking about my lovely nest that I forget I was supposed to be answering a question.

Wracking my brain to recall what Leon had asked, I say, "But I feel a lot calmer than I did a minute ago."

"Good. Let's go ahead and get started." Leon proposes, leaning back in his seat. "Think back for me Ella, what's the first thing you can remember of your life?"

"I don't remember a lot." I confess, preoccupying myself by running my hand over my baby bump.

Not distinctly at least. My childhood is kind of a blur, small flashes and an understanding of things that happened, but few scenes that I can recreate in my head, you know?"

The words come forth much more easily than I can ever remember happening in the past. Normally talking about my childhood is like pulling teeth, dragging the thoughts out of my mind to form stilted words and incomplete sentences. I don't mention that the scenes I do recall in high definition are the ones I want to remember least, the things that scarred me so badly a single sound smell can take me right back to that place. "The earliest thing was probably hunger. My sister crying because of how badly her stomach and head hurt, and me trying to sneak into the kitchens in the middle of the night to find something for her to eat."

"How old were you then?" Leon inquires curiously.

"Maybe four?" I guess, "old enough to have figured out how to sneak out of our dorm, but young enough that I hadn't figured out picking locks yet."

When I got to the kitchen my plan fell apart because it was locked, and then I was caught by the custodian."

"What happened when you were caught?" Leon presses, taking me deeper into the memory.

My high transcends to a new realm then, and it feels as though a door is opening in my mind. I'm not sure I like it – strange feelings rush in, embodying themselves throughout my body in a way that I don't understand. I'm not used to feeling emotions – normally I just think them, aware that/they exist, but unable to manifest them completely. It's almost as if they're trapped in a glass display case.. or they were. Now the glass is shattered around my feet and a lifetime of wants and hurts come teetering out. I try to clench my hands into fists, but I only succeed with one, the other squeezes Henry's hand in a death grip. He moves his free hand to envelop mine from both sides, reminding me that I'm not alone without saying a word.

I suck in a deep breath, and the tightness in my chest eases slightly. I was about to say that I don't remember, but I realize that isn't true. For the first time, I'm able to follow this memory past being caught. "He reported me, and the next day I was put in the punishment box."

"What is the punishment box?" Leon asks, sounding concerned.

"That's just what we called it as kids." I sigh. "It was where they put young children who

misbehaved: this tiny room in the basement, with no lights and no windows. They'd lock us inside and leave us in the cramped darkness for hours and hours. There was no food or water, no contact to the outside world. The longest I ever spent there was two days."

"Did anyone outside of the orphanage know?"

Henry questions, sounding suspiciously like his son had when I shared the abuse I suffered with him – like a man determined to find the people responsible and destroy them.

"The children weren't ever really allowed to interact with people from the outside. Sometimes parents would come to see if there were children they wanted to adopt, but we were always told to be on our best behavior- to be seen and not heard.

Cora and I always hid when they came though. We were afraid of being separated." I explain, thinking deeply.

"So you never met anyone from the outside world?"

Leon poses, and though I can tell he's trying to keep the emotion from his voice, I sense a hint of disappointment, as if this fact means we're headed towards a dead end.

"We did later." I inform him, "After we ran away.

And there was once.. " I trail off, feeling as though there's an image hovering on the edge of my consciousness, just out of reach. It reminds me of trying to remember a name or word that's on the tip of your tongue, only this time it's a piece of my own history.

"Are you remembering something, Ella?" Leon says, full of patience.

"I don't... I can't reach it." I huff in frustration.

"Don't try to force it. The harder you work at it the harder it will become." Leon coaches. "Just take some deep breaths for me and let the memory come to you. You were saying that you rarely met outsiders, and you hid when they came. So let me ask you this, if you did meet someone, why was it possible? When did it happen and why didn't you hide?"

"Because they weren't parents." I answer, without even trying. "And they were there for me." I continue, the blurry image becoming clearer in my mind. "I was eleven. It was two men in long robes, and they smelled so strange." I recall. "They were tall and powerful, they gave off this energy that I didn't understand but which frightened me. When I saw them, something inside of me kind of crumpled."

“Keep going Ella. How did you know they were there for you?” Leon encourages.

“Cora and I were getting ready for bed.” I answer, not sure where this information is coming from.

It’s almost like I’m bringing it to life only after the words are out. As soon as I say it, I can see it in my mind’s eye. “The head of the orphanage came into the dorm and everyone scattered. They thought it was he, that she’d come early... ” I’m so lost in the memory that I don’t pause to explain, “I was the only one who stayed out and the headmaster just smiled. He told me that I must have known I had visitors. They took me out and I was terrified. I knew what happened when people came in the night and took you away. I naturally assumed they wanted to hurt me like the others... and they did, just not in the way I expected.”

Henry’s hands tighten reflexively on mine, but I can’t bring myself to look at him, to see the pity in his eyes. “The headmaster left me alone with the men – he seemed very strange, as if in a trance.

The men sat me down and told me they were priests of a very sacred order. They said... they said I had magic in me and they needed to suppress it so I could stay hidden.” My eyes slam open as the memory comes back to me fully. “I think... I think they took my wolf.”

Chapter 179 – Bound

Ella

“It’s all right, Ella” The first priest says, approaching me as one might a skittish horse with slow, measured movements and hands exposed to show he holds no weapon. “We only want to protect you.”

“Protect me from what?” I question shakily, my back flush against the locked door.

“You have a very powerful magic inside you, and if it’s allowed to come out you’ll be exposed. We can’t let that happen.” He explains, using a tone much too gentle to be trustworthy. It’s as though he’s trying to trick me, to convince me he’s kind when he truly intends malice.

“I don’t have any magic.” I insist, wishing that I did.

Maybe if I was magic I might be able to put a stop to the things happening here – to protect the others without bringing harm to myself. I was so preoccupied with this statement that I almost missed the second piece of information. “Exposed to what?”

“You do, it just hasn’t shown itself yet.” The second priest sighs, keeping his distance but watching me with sharp eyes. “At least not in ways you understand. Tell me, have you never noticed how much stronger you are than your peers? That you can hear and smell things from much greater distances? That you can run faster, jump higher,- suffer greater injuries with less pain?” He inquires, his hawkish gaze searing into me, “do they not follow you? Gravitate to your side and obey you as a leader?”

My head spins, making me dizzy with the possibilities. He guesses correctly, but that can’t be because I have some sort of special power. It’s just the way things are. isn’t it?

“And exposed to a world you cannot yet join.” The first man adds. “It must happen when the time is right- but that time is a very long way off.”

I don’t understand.” I squeak, a sense of pure dread settling in the pit of my stomach

“We know, Ella” The second man proclaims, “And I’m sorry that this must happen, it will not be pleasant, but it is necessary for the future of our people...”

I shake my head, fighting back tears. Their words are triggering every alarm bell in my young mind I know what men do to little girls under the guise of necessity, the pretense of helping or protecting.

And I know exactly how unpleasant things can get. My blood runs cold, and my pulse races, triggering a strange new energy deep in my bones. It pulses through me like a

bolt of electricity, a wild thing writhes just beneath my skin, feral and rabid – begging to be free. “No, go away!” I hiss, my body shuddering with these new sensations.

The men look at each other with grim determination. “Her timing was sp0t on – another week and we’d be too late.”

“Im sorry, child.” The first priest professes gravely, closing the distance between us. “We would not do this if there was another way.”

Raw terror, unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before, takes over my senses. My instincts are screaming at me to run, to get away at any cost.

They tell me that whatever these men intend will be far worse than anything the doctor or dormitory matron have ever inflicted on me. But there isn’t anywhere to run. I’ve got a bolted door at my back and two attackers far larger and stronger than I am bearing down on me. I try to scream, but the second priest clamps his hand over my mouth before the sound can escape. I sink my teeth into his palm, but he doesn’t even flinch. He simply wrenches me away from the door, propelling me further into the room.

The first man grabs my legs, and I’m lifted off the ground. I thrash violently against their hold, my screams muffled and garbled as the priest continues to smother me. His bl00d seeps into my mouth, the metallic tang fanning the flames in my already sour stomach. My gorge rises, and I’m gagging, fighting for air and struggling to focus on my escape. I don’t know what to do or how to fight them – I’m powerless in their strong grips, and they seem completely unaffected by my attacks. I might as well be a feather swaying in the wind for all the effort they expend to contain me.

A distant keening pierces the air, sounding very far away. The cries are deeper than my own, thick with grief and pain more complex than the sheer fright in my own panicked screams.

“Leon,” A deep voice, tinged with concern, joins the terrible sounds. “It’s too much.”

“Just a little more.” A second voice, floating above me, replies. “We’re so close.”

I have no idea where these sounds are coming from, and the priests don’t seem to hear them at all. They continue with their task with single- minded focus, and i’m nothing more than a pawn in their game – tiny and helpless to stop them.

I’m thrust onto the floor and pinned down. The first priest restrains my wrists while the other sits on my kicking legs, pulling his tool bag to his side.

He extracts a shimmering silk cloth, it’s pearlescent sheen glimmering like moonlight, glowing in the darkness. It looks soft and airy, but when they begin wrapping it around

my body, it tightens around me with the unyielding force of steel. They enclose me in the fabric, winding it round and round like a glittering cocoon.

Once my arms are locked against my sides and my legs tightly shut, I'm completely immobile. I can't move a muscle in the fabric's punishing grip, and soon they're wrapping my head, as if they intend to mummify me alive. Just before the silk falls over my mouth, the priest finally removes his hand from my mouth. A half second of my scream escapes before the moonlight closes over my gaping lips, locking my face into the contours of a silent scream. I'm able to breathe, though I don't understand how.

It's one of my nightmares come to life – my mind is awake but I'm trapped in my own body, unable to move or speak. I can only lie there motionless, my brain screaming at my nerve endings and muscles to move, to do something – anything! But nothing happens because this isn't a dream from which I can wake, this is real, and it's only the beginning.

I can hear the priests rummaging around outside the walls of my silken prison, and I strain to identify the sounds: the clink of glass? The jostling of beads? A bottle uncorking? For all the fabric's strength, it does not stop me from feeling or smelling. My nose is filled with some pungent, herbaceous fragrance a moment before drops of moisture seep through the silk and onto my skin.

Light objects are laid over my body, stones or crystals placed in deliberate patterns on my head, chest, arms and legs. I'm still desperately trying to fight the cocoon, that foreign electricity in my veins warning me that I won't be able to fight much longer. Somehow, I know I'm running out of time, but I refuse to give up hope for escape.

The priests begin to chant then, speaking a language I do not recognize. Their words swirl around the small room, carrying arcane power older than the world itself. There was only darkness a moment ago, but now blinding light explodes in my vision, blinding me – but I can't close my eyes against it. The light is so searing that pain stabs in my head, and I'm sure I'll never see again.

Soon I realize that the light is the least of my worries. Fire is traveling along the inside of the fabric – but the silk does not burn, only I do. It blazes so hot that I'm sure any tears lingering on my cheeks will evaporate on the spot, I can feel my skin blistering, bursting until the flames can move on to charring my flesh and muscles. I'm dying...

I'm sure of it. I'm dying and I'm not going to escape. There won't be anyone left to protect Cora and the other children, they'll be alone and defenseless.

That same wild energy surges forward, and the priests lose their rhythm momentarily, their chant stuttering before regaining its droning force. I try to send another surge, but something is tearing inside of me, more painful even than the flames.

“Leon, I’m serious now, bring her out.” The man is angry now, furious. And the woman is still screaming, her voice hoarse with the effort. “We know what they did, it’s time to stop. She can’t take any more.”

“I’ll get the antidote.” The second voice agrees.

I’m breaking, unraveling, and with a violent wrench, my soul is ripped in two. The pain disappears, the light goes dim, but my chest feels hollow. There is no more power pulsing through my veins, and only now that it’s gone can I recognize that it was there in the first place. I’ve lost something sacred and integral to my being, though I don’t know what. I simply know I am no longer whole.

The priests speak softly as they unwrap me, “She was stronger than I expected... remarkable really.”

My face is uncovered, and though I was certain I’d been burnt to a crisp, I feel cold air against my tearstained skin, though I no longer have the will to cry. I stare blankly at the ceiling above me, until one of the withered faces moves into my line of sight. “It’s all over now.” The priest assures me, sounding regretful, “We’ll take away the memory too. You won’t have to remember this, little one”

His face blurs as a needle pinches my arm, and I return to the present.

Chapter 180 – Stolen Wolf

3rd Person

Henry glared at Leon as he injected the antidote for ether into Ella's arm. He was angry with the therapist, but he was also furious with himself for letting the hypnotic state continue for so long. He should have put his foot down the first time, when Ella first began screaming. Listening to her suffering had been horrible beyond belief. She'd started out by explaining the events that happened, but before long she disappeared into the memory, feeling everything that she described so that her story was interrupted by bouts of screaming and crying. She was reliving it all in front of them, and Henry despised himself for helping Leon torment her this way.

It took a moment for the antidote to kick in, but Ella finally went quiet as she was transported back to them. When her lashes parted to reveal bloodshot eyes, her tearstained skin turned grey, and in the next moment she lurched over the side of the couch and was vomiting onto the floor.

Henry pulled her hair back and ran a comforting hand up and down her back, crooning words of comfort to the poor child. "It's okay, dear one ... You're safe, it's over."

Once her stomach was empty and she was reduced to dry heaving, Henry guided her to lie down again. Leon appeared at her side with a wet rag and a glass of water, and Henry gently cleaned her face and helped her drink. "I'm sorry." Ella moaned, fresh tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Nonsense." Henry assured her. "If anyone has a right to be sick, it's you. You should have seen some of the messes I cleaned up when my boys were little. This is nothing."

Ella's hands went to her belly, her face twisted in guilt and pain. "He's upset." Ella whimpered, clearly referring to the baby "I frightened him.. the screaming.."

"Do you want me to call for the doctor?" Henry offered, "Just to be safe?"

Ella's gold eyes widened then clamped shut, and Henry remembered the things she'd confessed in her dream state. Hints about doctors abusing her, things that made his wolf apoplectic with rage.

"Will you stay with me if he comes?" Ella asked in a small voice, worried enough about her unborn child to agree, but not wanting to face an examination alone.

"of course." Henry promised, not looking at Leon as he gave the orders to the guards hovering in the doorway. They'd crashed into the room when Ella started screaming, and watched in horror as she recounted the priests binding her wolf, cutting her off from her inner animal. In their world such an act was an atrocity, a crime that should not have

been possible, and a violation a shifter should not be able to survive. The man nearest the door took off at a run, and Henry turned back to his daughter-in-law. "What can we do for you, Ella? What do you need?"

"We should talk through what just happened."

Leon interjected in his therapist voice. "She needs to process this."

"Not today she doesn't." Henry snapped back, "And not without her mate. We never should have attempted this without Dominic."

"Her mate can't change the past." Leon answered sternly. "This was always going to be terrible."

Henry growled wordlessly, and Ella curled in on herself a little. "I want my nest."

"Of course," Henry agreed, pulling her into his lap and wheeling her out of the sitting room and into the bedroom. He helped her climb into her pillowy sanctuary, purring and stroking her hair as she silently wept.

After a while, Ella blinked at him, seeming to realize what he was doing only after it began to work. "I thought wolves only purred for their mates?"- Her voice was still raspy from all the strain of the session, a mere shadow of its usual velvet tone.

"No." Henry corrected her with a sad smile. "We also purr for our children, and you're one of mine now."

Ella's lower lip quivered violently, and she reached for Henry's hand, holding it tightly. "Thank you."

The palace doctor arrived before Henry could tell Ella that she never needed to thank him for taking care of her. The physician checked on the pup and administered a sedative for Ella, advising no more hypnosis for at least a week. After he left, Ella was already teetering on the edge of a drug-induced sleep, but she managed to pin her father in law with a hollow eyed gaze that made his heart ache. "

Why did they do that to me?"

He knew she was talking about the priests who came to the orphanage, and he wished he had an answer for her. "I don't know." He confessed sorrowfully. "Before today, I didn't even know such a thing was possible."

"I always thought..." A wide yawn interrupted her, and she closed her eyes as she drowsily continued, "I always thought I lost my strength because they broke me... the

doctor and the matron... I believed they broke my spirit. But it was the priests." She shuddered, tears seeping out beneath her closed lashes. "They stole it."

Henry frowned, still petting her hair. "They took your wolf, Ella, but they never broke you. You survived despite everything. You took care of your sister and made a life for yourself. You might have been missing part of yourself, but the woman my son fell in love with – the woman we all fell in love with Was never weak"

To his surprise, the corner of her lip twitched up in a bittersweet tilt, somewhere between a grimace and a smile. "Because Dominic brought her back to me. She started waking up when we met. If you'd known me before him.." Her shoulders trembled and any sense of sweetness disappeared, "I h-hate them for doing that to me." She murmured, pure anguish heavy on her tongue.

"I do too." Henry shared. "We're going to get to the bottom of this, okay? You have my word." He vowed, overflowing with conviction. "For now, just sleep little mother. When you wake, Dominic will be waiting for your call and you can face it together."

As soon as Ella slipped into unconsciousness, Henry wheeled back into the sitting room. He didn't want to go too far in case she had bad dreams, though the doctor had promised the sedative would send her into such a deep sleep that dreaming would be impossible. He pulled out his phone and dialed his youngest, cold fury coursing through him.

Sinclair answered on the fourth ring, his deep voice filling Henry's ear. "Hi Dad, this isn't really a good time, we're about to reach the FrostFang capital."

"You need to make the time." Henry growled, "Ella just had her first hypnotherapy session and it did not go well."

Sinclair's voice went sharp as a knife, "Put her on."

"She's sedated." Henry explained, unable to quell the hardness in his tone even though it wasn't meant for his son. "But you need to know what happened and you need to be prepared to drop everything for her when she wakes."

"What happened?" Sinclair inquired, concern making his voice every bit as gruff as his father's.

Henry shared the tale in starts and stops, pausing to entertain his son's growls and curses. When the story was finished, Henry added. "She was frightened from the beginning and didn't want to do it, and we made her." He recalled, guilt tying his insides into knots. "She forced herself to do it because she didn't want to disappoint you, and we didn't know how bad.. we had no idea what she'd been through, Dominic. But I have to

think you did.”

“I knew about the a.buse.” Sinclair confirmed, his voice raw and thick with emotion. “I had no idea about her wolf. We knew that something like that must have happened to keep it dormant, but I assumed it was when she was an infant – before she was left with the humans. I never would have asked her to do this without me if I’d believed -“

“You shouldn’t have asked her to do it without you at all.” Henry corrected firmly. “She needed her mate today and I was a sorry subst!tute.”

“She chose you because she felt safe with you.”

Sinclair replied, wanting to deny his father’s negligence even as he grappled with his guilt. “But you’re right. I should have been there.” He paused, breathing heavily. “But I should be here too, and I should be back in Moon Valley fighting Damon don’t know how to do it all, Dad. I can’t be there for Ella without failing the pack, and I can’t be there for the pack without failing my mate.”

“But why now, why was digging into her past urgent enough to risk this in the first place?”

Henry asked, sympathetic for his son, sharing his pain, but also frustrated.

“Don’t you think it’s connected?” Sinclair inquired.”

I mean, think about what you just told me. Those priests had to have been servants of the Goddess, and they told her she was being hidden, that she couldn’t join the shifter world until the time was right. Then someone inseminates her with my s.perm just before the election, and her wolf wakes just before the war. Call me crazy but that sounds pretty prophetic from where I stand.”

If Henry had still possessed the ability to stand, he would have needed to sit down. He even considered climbing out of his wheelchair and lying down, so unsteady did he feel. He’d been so busy comforting Ella and so aghast by the assault she endured that he hadn’t put the pieces together yet. “I think you’re right.” He gulped, glancing back to the door where his daughter-in-law slept. “I think we’re seeing the Goddess’s plans in action.”

Sinclair agreed with somber gravity. “And they’re all about Ella.”

Chapter 181 – Saint Ella

Ella

I sleep through the night and well into the next day. My mind is foggy when I wake, and it takes a moment for everything to come rushing back to me. I wince as the memories of my hypnosis session take hold, and my first thought is of Rafe. I tap into our bond.

The tiny being is asleep, but I can feel the lingering stress and fear clinging to his consciousness. I cradle my belly in my arms, feeling a new depth of sorrow for causing my child pain – beyond regret, sadness or guilt.

The force and scale takes me by surprise, and I know I have to work on controlling the feelings I send through our bond. Suddenly I understand only too well why Sinclair holds bad feelings back from me, and though I don't like being kept in the dark, I don't think he's wrong either. In fact, I'm glad my mate is far enough away that he couldn't feel my fear and pain yesterday too.

It would have affected him so much more than it did Henry, and he has more than enough to worry about as it is. I take a bubble bath, and as I rest in the steaming water my pup stirs, fluttering in my womb and emitting a pulse of cautious energy...

He's still wary, still confused and upset by what he heard and felt during my trance. "Hello sweet pup." I hum, stroking my navel and wishing I could rock him in my arms already. "It's okay, everything is okay." I send all the affection, solace and calm I can summon down to him, and he relaxes, his miniscule fingers clutching at the wall of my uterus as if he's reaching for me. I rest my hand on the opposite side of his, singing a soft lullaby and wishing I had a male's ability to purr.

I think Rafe feels the same way, because a moment later he sends a fuzzy, half formed memory to me – of large, protective hands and a deep rumbling sound, the thing that comforts us both more than anything else. A tug of longing accompanies the hazy thought, and I realize he misses Sinclair.

I know, my love. I miss him too." I share, pausing my singing for a moment as I struggle to hold back my own pining. I want nothing more than to feel Sinclair's touch, to hear his beloved voice murmuring comfort in my ear – even from hundreds of miles away. At the same-time, I can't bring myself to call him. If I do, I know he'll sense that something is wrong, and I'm not going to distract him from the war effort by making him worry I can't handle a few memories. After all – I lived through these things, if I was able to survive them then surely I can survive remembering them.

So I pull myself out of my bath and get dressed, switching to a flowing maxi dress when I realize my maternity jeans are too tight now to fit over my hips and belly. "Are you having a growth spurt, munchkin?" I ask my pup, excited and pleased that he's getting bigger

and stronger.

Just remember that Mommy is a lot smaller than Daddy, so don't go getting too big, okay?" I add, remembering the birthing class where they told us to expect twelve pound babies. I wonder if I would have grown into a taller, larger woman if my wolf hadn't been bound, but I suppose there's no way to know now.

When I walk out of my room, intending to take my growling stomach down to the kitchens for a snack, my guards straighten up and puff their chests out, as if they want to look as large and powerful as possible. It's a bit odd, but I don't think anything of their behavior until I get downstairs and feel all the eyes following me through the palace, and all the hushed murmurs circling in my wake. I catch a few snippets of the whispers, my heart sinking when I hear the words, priests... her wolf was bound...so many years,"

Apparently everyone knows what happened during my hypnosis, and as much as I want to curl in on myself to hide from the scrutiny of so many strangers, I notch my chin up and ignore them. It isn't until I hear another snatch of speech nearer the kitchens that I realize their tones aren't pitying or condescending, but reverent. "How did she survive? ...Chosen by the Goddess... blessed."

If I thought things would be better once I reached the service level of the palace, I was sorely mistaken. If anything I draw more attention, and when I walk into the kitchens I cause quite the commotion. At once I'm being guided into a chair and plate upon plate of food is being set in front of me, eager cooks and maids murmuring their admiration and asking me to name any dish or delicacy, promising to whip up whatever I desire. I smile and thank them, insisting I don't need anything special. Still, the head Chef, an older woman with a no nonsense attitude, refuses to let me leave until I've told her my favorite meal, promising to cook it for supper this evening, I oblige, then quickly retreat to the orphan's wing. If there's anyone I can count on not to treat me differently – whether with awe or pity – it's Isabel.

She doesn't disappoint, as I enter she arches a sardonic brow. "Well if it isn't Saint Ella."

I smile, feeling a rush of fondness for the prickly woman. This is why I like her. She gives me no judgment, no pity and no fawning. She sees me exactly the same way she did yesterday, and I need that when I hardly recognize myself anymore. "Good afternoon, Isabel." I greet warmly. There's a baby wrapped in a sling against her chest, and I move forward to admire the child. Sadie stares up at us with wide blue eyes, and I stroke a finger over her cheek. How's she doing?"

"She's getting spoiled rotten." Isabel remarks dryly, her tone masking the deep affection I know she feels for the infant. "She always wants to be held and wails like a little banshee if she's put down even for a moment."

“What a lucky girl that you’re here to serve her every whim.” I tease, strolling around to check on the other pups. Even with the children we’ve been able to foster with local families, the planes keep bringing more, and the nursery is growing to be too large for one woman to wrangle alone.

We’ve had a few more volunteers from the city express interest in helping here. If you had more hands on deck, you could take turns with Miss Spoily there.” I offer, nodding towards Sadie and watching Isabel’s expression closely. Her eyes narrow and I add, “or they could free you up so you can devote your time to the pups who need the most attention.”

Isabel wraps a protective arm around Sadie’s back, and I know I’ve read her correctly. She’s clearly attached to the pup. (I’m not going to let just anyone come in here.” She counters stiffly.

I would have to interview them.”

“That can be arranged.” I promise, grinning at a toddler who’s just woken from his nap and is now standing at the bars of his crib, begging to be picked up. I pull him into my arms, kissing his chubby cheeks. “Well hello there, handsome. Did you have a nice nap?”

He giggles as I bounce him in my arms, but his laughter dies away quickly, as if he’s remembering something unpleasant. “I don’t like naps.” He whispers sulkily.

Really?” I ask, making my voice sound shocked.

I love naps. Naps are the best.”

He looks at me curiously. “You take naps?”

“Of course I do, whenever I can.” I share, studying his small face as his features settle into a frown.

“Mommy naps too.” He tells me a minute later, looking grim but hopeful. Is she here?”

“No angel.” I sigh, cuddling him a bit closer. He leans his cheek against my shoulder, sniffing softly. “Did you used to nap with your Mommy?”

I ask. Do you not like them anymore because she isn’t here to snuggle with you?”

He nods pitifully, and I rub his back. I catch Isabel watching us with a look of abject despair, but she covers it quickly, turning away. Well I’ll tell you what. I know I’m not as good as your Mommy, but I’ll nap with you if you want?”

He nods again, and I give him a squeeze, trying to pour all the love in my heart into his small body. I feel a tug on my dress, and I look down to find another pup hovering at my side. This one is a little girl around four, and she's looking up at me like she's not sure if I'm real. "Can I naps with you too?" She asks shyly, "I have bad dreams when I sleeps alone."

"Of course." I promise, soon met with a chorus of, "Me too? What about me? Can I?" I look around at the other pups and realize they've been listening all along, and they're all wearing similarly hopeful expressions. "I'll tell you what, why don't we make a nice big blanket fort, and every afternoon when I take my nap, anyone who wants to come cuddle will be welcome? How does that sound?"

A chorus of approval meets my ears, and I send the guards at the door to gather extra blankets and pillows, and the little girl clutching my skirt says, "My big sister says you're a Princess, and the Goddess sent you to us. Is she right? Is it really true?"

Isabel snorts at my surprised expression.

Rumors reach the nursery just as fast as they do the rest of the palace. Did you really think they wouldn't know?")

"I am no Princess," I tell the child. And I don't know the Goddess's plans any more than you do little one."

She will be better than a Princess." Isabel interjected, gentling her tone for the child.

When her mate leads his army back home and overthrows the tyrant, she will be Queen." I'm taken aback by the firm conviction in her voice, as if she is looking forward to this future. Her icy gaze meets mine, and I see it is more than mere conviction, it's closer to a demand. I realize she believes in Sinclair and me, we've given her hope when she wanted none, and now she's going to hold us to it. She won't stand for being let down, and that is the last thing I want to do.

If there are more secrets waiting in my past, I have to continue searching for them. I need answers if I am to do right by Isabel and these pups, by all the shifters and humans suffering in this war. I am not eager to try hypnosis and ether again, but I can be brave for them – if not for myself.

Chapter 182 – Sinclair

Sinclair

My wolf is half-mad with guilt and worry. I've been waiting for Ella's call all day, but when the clock strikes four and I still haven't heard a peep from my mate, I call my father. The line rings for what feels like ages, but then Dad's familiar face appears on my screen. "Is she still asleep?" I inquire, before he even has a chance to greet me.

"I haven't seen her." Dad replies, his brow crinkling in the video. The image is jostling slightly, his background shifting and changing as he wheels himself forward with one hand. But I've been at the airfield all day. I'm just getting back to the palace now. I'll check on her now."

I gnash my teeth impatiently, not really wanting to talk about anything until I know how my mate is doing. Still, I ask, "How was it today?"

More of the same, I'm afraid." Dad reveals sadly.

The average number of refugees making the trip each day hasn't increased, but it hasn't decreased either."

What about their conditions?" I ask, weary to the bone amidst so much misfortune. "Are there more injuries? More unaccompanied pups?"

"Everything seems stable." Dad reports, but I can tell he doesn't consider this any victory. "How did it go with the FrostFang Alpha?"

"Well, I think." I answer, looking out the windows of my suite in the FrostFang pack's headquarters. A mountain range spreads out on the horizon, the majestic towers of volcanic rock covered in verdant peat moss. It's green and glorious, but there are almost no trees. I feel a deep pang as I think about the dense forests back home, wondering how these wolves can be so content without any woodlands.

Gabriel said Alpha Aiden would be an easy sell, and so far he's been very supportive. He hasn't officially pledged his alliance, but I think we can count him among our friends at the summit.

"And you? How are you holding up?" My father inquires, a knowing timbre in his rich voice.

"It's cold up here, more like back home." I muse aloud, my train of thought momentarily derailed by my wolf's agitated energy. If Ella's still out I may let my wolf out for a run, he's been bloody stir crazy with all the travel and the situation with Ella isn't helping. He's on edge and I'm not going to be able to keep a handle on him much longer."

(You might consider doing that even if she is awake – before you two talk.” Dad advises, but despite his wisdom I’m tracking the interiors of Gabriel’s palace as he moves through the halls, measuring the distance between him and my mate. “Depending on how she’s doing, seeing her might push you over the edge.”)

I know you’re right.” I concede, “But I don’t think I can stand it. It’s one thing if she’s still resting. it’s another if she’s trying to work through this alone.”

Well the word around the palace is that she’s a gift from the Goddess, sent to see us through the war.”

Dad shares, his mouth twisting with wry humor. “It seems the guards who oversaw her hypnosis couldn’t quite keep it to themselves. I promise you she’ll have lots of support when she comes to.”

He pushes into our suite, and I hold my breath, c0cking my ears for sounds of movement or tears.

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Dad pauses in the doorway of the bedroom, looking bemused. “Well she isn’t here.” He announces after a moment. He looks around, backtracking into the sitting room and switching the camera view so I can see his perspective. He lifts a cell phone from the coffee table, pressing the power b.utton but only finding a black screen. “Her phone is here and dead.”

My heart beats louder in my c.hest, and I smother a growl. “Okay, check with the guards – then try the kitchens, the nursery, Cora’s rooms and the camp – in that order.”

It only takes ten minutes to find my mate, but I’d be lying if I said I bore the wait well. My mind races with the unknown. Why didn’t she call me the moment she woke? Is she alright? Maybe I should have called Phill!pe – he won’t have left her side.

Of course when my father wheels into the nursery, Isabel meets us at the door, her arms crossed over her c.hest. “Where have you been?” She demands.

That mate of yours has insured my pups will be up half the night! I tried to tell her they’d already napped but no, she couldn’t resist.”

A moment later I understand, because the video draws nearer and nearer to a masterful blanket fort as Dad crosses the room. And then she’s there on my screen, curled up at the center of a puppy pile.

They surround her on all sides, arms and legs splayed over her body as she cuddles a little boy to her breast, lost in the tangle of limbs. My heart melts, and suddenly I don't care why she didn't call me. It's one of the sweetest scenes I've ever seen, and the last thing I want to do is disturb their slumber.

Unfortunately my mate seems to sense my virtual presence, because she blinks her gorgeous gold eyes a moment later and stretches like a sleepy kitten.

Her gaze lands on my face before she even looks at Dad, as if her instincts drew her to the phone in his hand like a magnet. Raw vulnerability transforms her features from sleep, as if she wasn't prepared to see me so soon, or face the feelings I naturally provoke. "Hello trouble." I greet huskily, "Did I interrupt your cuddle party?"

She peeks up at me from beneath her lashes, untangling herself from the pups enough to sit up and glance warily at the other adults in the room. As I can see a hundred emotions flickering in the bottomless pools of her eyes before she pulls a curtain over her expression, erasing any hint of her true feelings.

She doesn't say a word, so I continue. "How are you doing, little mate?" I inquire tenderly, "I've been worried about you."

Ella's eyes widen imperceptibly, and then she slumps back down against the piled pillows, "They told you." She moans, frustration and just a little resentment lacing her silken voice.

As I watch, I see her eyes jump somewhere above the screen, and I can imagine my father gesturing a warning to her. A wordless rumble rises in my chest,

"Should I take that to mean you planned on keeping it to yourself?" I inquire ominously.

Ella shivers at my dominant tone, "That isn't what I meant.)

(Dad, we need a moment alone." I state, "Can you please clear the room?"

Ella's eyes leap to the sleeping pups, clearly worried about waking them. "No – she object, at the same moment Isabel growls, "Absolutely not."

"I'll go upstairs and call you from my phone." Ella offers, clearly not realizing the device is dead. When I tell her as much she responds that she'll sit beside the charger. I watch as she kisses the dozing children and extracts herself from the pile, then clambers up and disappears out the door.

I hang up with Dad, and a few minutes later my phone rings and Ella's face appears on the screen, beautiful and haunted. "Start talking, baby." I instruct, needing to know what

she's thinking.

Ella reclines in her nest, the curtained walls casting her features in shadows. "I have too many questions to count." She admits, clearly deciding to skip over the difficult parts and avoid evoking the painful memories. "Who were those Priests? How did they know about me? Why did they say I needed to stay hidden? I don't understand any of it – the only thing that makes sense now is why everything changed. I was living without a critical piece of my soul for years, and the entire world became duller and emptier because of it."

I purr sympathetically. "I have those same questions," I relate, wishing I could touch her. "But right now I'm more concerned with how you're feeling, Ella."

She shrugs non committally, "Okay. I've been better." She mutters, "But I've also been worse."

"That isn't a real answer and you know it." I admonish, working to keep my voice soft and even "

Is that why you didn't call me? Why you wanted to keep it from me?"

"I didn't want to worry you." Ella replies thickly,

And you don't get to be mad about that because you do the same thing with me all the time," Her tone is petulant, but I can hear the tears in her voice even if I can't see them in the low light.

"How worried should I be, little wolf?" I rumble, " because I have to tell you, you seem awfully upset for someone claiming to be okay."

"I'm not upset." She insists, hiccuping and proving her words false. I'm just... " She trails off, her lip quivering.

"Just what, Ella?" I prompt, instinctively sensing that this is the true reason she avoided reaching out.

She can fake it with everyone else, but she can't fake it with me. I can read her like a book, and she knows it.

I scared Rafe." She admits miserably. "He's still not at ease, and I don't understand... " She sniffles, swiping at her cheeks. "If someone knew I was there .. if they knew I was suffering, then why did they leave me there? I could have been hidden anywhere ... but those priests must have known the kind of place the orphanage was." Her shining eyes glow up at the phone screen. "They said they were there to protect me... they were

obviously wolves, why would they let the humans hurt me that way?"

I don't know, sweetheart, " I croon, sending my purrs over the line. "But I promise we'll find out.

Chapter 183 – Roger’s Injury

3rd Person

Cora’s first week working with the doctors at the airfield was both overwhelming and fascinating. She felt like she was lightyears behind the Vanaran physicians in medical expertise and technological know-how, but they were welcoming and patient with her deficiencies. She threw herself into the work, accepting the fact that she’d have to start as a glorified scrub nurse until she learned enough to start doing major procedures and seeing patients on her own.

Cora felt as she had in the early days of medical school, as if her brain was a sodden sponge already oversaturated with new information but still trying to soak up more. The work was fascinating, but it was also devastating and draining.

This wasn’t like being in school and practicing on her fellow students or cadavers – her patients were real people and they were suffering so much more than injury or disease. They were grappling with grief and loss – for the lives and homeland they cherished if nothing else.

By the end of her fourth day on the job, Cora was ready to collapse. She looked around at the other doctors and wondered how on earth they found the strength to keep up this work. She was tempted to ask, but instead she gritted her teeth and pushed through the last hour of her shift. About half an hour before they were set to finish for the day, Cora found herself with a rare moment of quiet. There was only one patient left, and the head surgeon already had too many helping hands for her to pitch in.

Cora began to clean her work station, disinfecting! everything she’d touched and wiping down every surface in sight, before neatly stowing her supplies. She was intently scrubbing her hands when a familiar voice sounded over her shoulder. “Do you have time for one last patient?”

She looked up to find her new colleague, May, standing behind her with a kind expression. Cora looked around, both searching for the patient in question and a substitute for the sick bay she’d just packed up. Her eyes landed on the other woman’s, which seemed viable. “Can I use your workstation?”

“Sure.” May agreed, “it’s sanitized but haven’t put everything up yet.” “Who’s the patient?” Cora asked, pulling on a fresh pair of gloves. “He requested you by name,” May shrugged. “I think he’s part of your own delegation.”

Cora’s traitorous heart skipped a beat, and a moment later Roger appeared, cradling his left hand. Cora narrowed her eyes, determined not to let the butterflies causing chaos in her tummy sway her judgment. He stood in the doorway, all masculine charm and Alpha dominance – and as usual, his full attention was glued to her blushing face.

“You know there’s an in-house physician at the Palace.” She stated coolly. I’m sure his team can handle whatever ailment plaguing you.}

“But the palace is so far away, and you don’t have any other patients, right?” Roger inquired, a devious glint in his eyes.

Just because I don’t now, doesn’t mean an emergency might not come in at any moment.”

Cora countered, her hands on her hips. “And if my hands are tied with you, then who will help them?”

still unphased, the clever wolf pursed his lips. “One of the other physicians packing away their stations?” He suggests, nodding to the Vanaran doctors around them.

Cora huffed, “what’s wrong with you anyway?”

Roger presented his hand, which had a large but certainly non-urgent splinter of wood embedded in his palm. “I think I’m dying.”

Cora glowered, the leash on her temper snapping taught. It took a lot of built up frustration for her to let loose at someone, but she’d been tormented by this wolf for more than a week now. True, he hadn’t made a move since that confusing night at dinner, but his presence was impossible to escape. She could always feel when he was near, and half the time she wasn’t quick enough to flee before he entered a room and found her with those dark eyes.

She was constantly trying not to squim under his searing gaze, forever trying to block out his husky voice so it wouldn’t make her pulse race. Things had gotten to the point that Cora was practically looking around corners to make sure he wasn’t lying in wait to surprise and tempt her with his rugged features and mysterious allure.

Thus, when faced with this latest outrage, Cora threw her well-honed skills for self-preservation out the window. “Are you fucking kidding me, Roger? You do realize that people are actually dying here, don’t you?” She didn’t wait for him to answer furiously ripping off her gloves. “This isn’t cute, you know. Do you have any idea what my day has been like?”

His roguish expression softened, and he replied, From the looks of it, it’s been the sort that means you’re in dire need of a laugh.” Roger assessed, mouth quirked. “And a stiff drink – perhaps with a friend who’s good at listening.”

“And that’s supposed to be you?” She snorted derisively. “If that’s your example of your

humor, then I'm not interested in hearing more, and I don't drink." I've seen you drink more than once, Cora. Roger corrected her, a note of warning entering his voice.

I should have said that I don't drink with you." She amended in a biting tone. "oh?" He answered with a smirk. "Why not?"

You're not scared are you? Cora scowled, notching her chin up. I can't be baited that easily either, but I assure you fear isn't the problem."

(Then what is?" Roger pressed, moving forward so that he loomed over the curvy human. You've said you have no interest in me, so what's the problem? You get to relax and vent a little and enjoy a night off from all this stress – is that so terrible.

(I don't want to humanize you." She countered fiercely. "If I do, I might forget what a jerk you are."

Roger chuckled, sidling closer. "Should I take that to mean I'm growing on you?" He questioned slyly.

I knew the ice cream would work." «The ice cream was a dirty trick and you know it."

Cora insisted stubbornly, trying not to let him see how much she'd enjoyed it. In truth it had been the best ice cream she'd ever tasted, and though she'd only meant to take a single bite before smashing it in the wolf's smug face, she'd ended up devouring it all in a single sitting. "You need to learn how to take no for an answer.

Roger emitted a wordless rumble. "Now I have to think that a brilliant doctor who spent as many years working among wolves as you did, must know better than to challenge an Alpha."

"You see, this is the problem with you wolves." Cora seethed. A no isn't a challenge, it's not a provocation, it's simply an answer to a basic question."

Roger purred, but it was not a gentle sound, it was more like a murmur somewhere between a hum and a growl. His eyes began to glow amber as he looked down at Cora. And the problem with you humans, is that you fail to realize how much you say with body language and pheromones. I take your no as a challenge because it's meant as one, and I pursue you despite your protests because I can smell your attraction to me,)

(I've been attracted to plenty of people I had no intention of taking to bed. Attraction is a reflex, not proof or justification of actual interest." Cora hissed defensively. "I don't do this. I don't get involved with men who want more from me than I can give – it's a recipe for disaster."

“And what do you give?” Roger questioned, settling his hands on her hips and scalding her through her clothes. Some hurried one night stand with a stranger you meet in a bar and won’t ever see again?”

Cora’s chocolate eyes went wide. “How did you know that?”

“An educated guess.” Roger flashed his fangs. Which you just confirmed.” His powerful fingers ran up her side, and he relished the sound of her heart pounding against her ribcage at a mile a minute.

But for the record, I knew because I’ve been the same way ever since Lydia left me. It’s not a pattern you begin because it’s what you truly want – you do it because it’s safer than risking your heart.” He searched her lovely face, “Of course, we know why I chose that path – why did you, Cora?”

“Stop it.” Cora ordered sharply. “Stop talking to me this way, stop touching me.” Her lower lip quivered dangerously, and Roger sighed, accepting that he wasn’t going to get any further with the human on this day.

He released her slowly, “I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk, whether it’s about your work here, or us.” He offered. “Anything you have to say, I always want to listen.” He reached over to her medical tools and plucked a pair of tweezers from the tray, quickly extracting the splinter from his hand and retreating.

Cora was left staring after him in surprise and confusion, feeling – for the first time – as if she was way out of her depth with this wolf.

She didn’t like it- not one bit.

Chapter 184 – Bad Dreams

Ella

Darkness, terror, pain – my wolf being torn away. Blinding light, loss... emptiness. I wake screaming, for the sixth day in a row. It's been a week since Leon uncovered the memory of having my wolf bound, and every night has passed in the same exhausting pattern. I stay awake as long as possible, until I can no longer keep my eyes open, and then there is no time to consider calling my mate. The demons descend the moment I relax my defenses, and I'm helpless to keep them at bay.

Phillippe rushes in, a familiar look of worry on his face. His eyes go straight to me rather than scanning the room for threats, because by now he's learned that the greatest threats are in my head. "Are you okay?" He asks, frowning.

I nod, sitting up in my nest and pushing the blankets away, "It's just more of the same." My phone rings at my bedside, and I take a deep breath before answering Sinclair's call. "Good morning, mate." "Good morning, trouble." He rumbles warmly, "You missed another dream date:"

"I know," I say regretfully. "Im sorry, I've just been so exhausted that I fall asleep before I can think about dreams." In truth the nightmares claim me before I can hear my mate's calls, but I'll be damned if I'm going to admit that to the overprotective Alpha.

Phillippe scowls disapprovingly, crossing his arms over his chest in obvious admonition for my lie. I shoot him a warning glare to keep his mouth shut, and he offers me one final glower before retreating from the room so we can finish our call in private.

"Turn on your camera, baby." Sinclair instructs, "I want to see you. I do as he asks, hoping I don't have dark circles beneath my eyes. "Where are you now?" I ask, leaning back against my pillows.

His handsome face appears on the screen, deep green eyes drinking me in like a blind man who's only just regained his sight. Sinclair is still abed as well, and I can see a hint of his bare chest at the bottom of the feed, his muscles flexing and relaxing as he gets comfortable. "The White Claw territory." Sinclair answers, sounding drowsy still. "

This Alpha is a tricky one – very cunning and difficult to read. He's unpredictable too, and I'm not sure how to best approach him." "His past politics don't give any hint?" I ask, feeling more awake than my mate seemns. "His voting record?"

"It's all over the board." Sinclair explains, "And he's not one for deals and alliances. He votes based on what's best for his pack, but it isn't clear how he decides his priorities."

"You can always play the Damon will set his sights on Vanara once he conquers the

continent' card, or point out the resource strain of accepting sO many refugees." I suggest, rubbing my belly.

Once again, Rafe had been startled and upset by my nightmares, but hearing his father's voice always Works wonders – possibly because it calms me every bit as much as it does him.

"Both good ideas." Sinclair murmurs, "But I don't really want to talk strategy right now, baby."

"Oh, what do you want to talk about?" I inquire slyly, "summit plans? The refugee camp? What color dress I should get for the ball?"

Sinclair chuckles, "Imp. How about we discuss why on earth you're wearing clothes in my bed?"

"Hey this is my nest." I correct him saucily. "And besides, you're not here. Just because you want me n.aked all the time

"I'd certainly like to see you n.aked now." Sinclair interjects, his voice low and husky. His arm is moving just out of frame, and from the hungry glint in his eye, I can tell he's stroking himself.

"Hmm, I don't know." I tease, fiddling with the strap on my nightdress. "I seem to remember a certain bossy wolf telling me that my pleasure belongs to him. and forbidding me from touching myself because it's his responsibility as my mâte." I pull down the fabric to expose one of my b.reasts, cupping the sensitive mound in my hand as I admire my mate. "I think if I were n.aked and I had the sight of such a gorgeous, virile Alpha in front of me like this ... I would be very tempted to misbehave."

"Is that so?" Sinclair inquires darkly, his wolf eyes flashing.

I bite my lower lip and nod. "I can't help myself." I confess, revealing my other b.reast and shimmying out of my nightgown. I lift the phone so he can see my fingers training down over my belly and between my legs. "It's been so long since I felt your touch, Dominic." I might be doing this for show, but it's only too true. My wolf has been going crazy without affection from her mate, and I wasn't far from taking matters into my own hands as it was. I gently circle my swollen clit with my fingertips, my eyes falling closed with delight.

Sinclair growls, sending a delicious shiver down my spine, "Naughty mate." He croons, "If I didn't know any better I'd think you were trying to earn yourself a spanking. But I'll forgive this much because I'm away, just as long as you don't go any further."

On cue, I sink my fingers into my soaked channel, gasping and moaning at the sensation, even as I wish it were his hands on my body, his hardness filling me. "Oh you're really in for it now." Sinclair warns me, all grumbly and foreboding.

My pulse races and my lust spikes as his own movements become more pronounced. He watches me like a starving man as he rubs his hard member, making me feel beautiful and powerful at once. "What are you thinking about, trouble? Hmm, what's got you so worked up that you're willing to risk provoking my wolf this way?"

"You." I confess, wishing I had both hands free so I could give some attention to my aching breasts. I'm thinking about all the wicked things you're going to do to me when you get back."

"Tell me." Sinclair orders seductively, shifting his own phone so that I can see down below his waist.

Licking my lips, I find myself getting distracted by the heat building inside of me, so much so that my mate has to call my attention back to him with a soft purr. "You'll start slow," I finally answer, my voice little more than a whisper. "You'll kiss me until my knees go weak... and then you'll strip off my clothes and explore every inch of my body with your mouth and hands, discovering the ways my shape has changed and teasing me until I'm writhing underneath you.. and then... and then, ohh." My sheath clenches around my fingers, and my hips rock up into my hand.

I can't continue, so my mate takes over. "And then I won't be able to wait any longer." Sinclair tells me sensually. "It's been too long, and I'll be nearly desperate to be inside you. After all this is only the first time of many, so I won't worry about pacing myself or letting you off easy for all of your mischief while I've been away. I'll drive myself into your tight little pussy in a single thrust and rut you so hard that you see stars."

The phone is shaking in my hand, and I'm fighting to smother my whimpers as I near the edge. "Don't you dare drop that phone, little wolf." Sinclair rumbles, sounding as if he's barely hanging onto his control. "And don't you dare come yet, because I'm not done telling you my plans." I whine needily, and he only purrs with satisfaction. "Do you like being watched this way, Ella? Do you like touching yourself on camera for me?" nod, barely containing a sob. "Please, Dominic.

I'm so close." "Not yet, baby. I'm enjoying seeing what a dirty girl you are." He declares. I shake my head, not sure whether I'm trying to deny his words or hold off the wave of rapture swelling above me. Sinclair chuckles knowingly,

No? I'm wrong?" He croons, "you're not loving putting on this show for me, little exhibitionist?" "Only for you." I gasp, biting down on my lip so hard I draw blood. "No one else."

“Damned straight.” Sinclair replies, his voice like gravel. “Goddess, I can’t wait to be inside you again. I’ll make you beg, just like this. I’ll hold my power back from you until you’re finally gushing all over my c0ck, and then I’m going to give you everything I have. I’m going to-“

I can’t bear anymore, I detonate then and there, crying out into the empty room. I catch a look of triumph from my mate, even as the sight of my defiant ecstasy sends Sinclair over the edge himself and his lusty growls fill my ears as he finds his release in his hand.

Afterwards he purrs, scolding me and praising me in equal measure, and I belatedly realize he wanted to make me lose control all along – just so he has an excuse to inflict more sensual torments on me later. I float in the heady afterglow, soaking up his sweet nothings and fighting to stay awake.

“Go back to sleep, sweetheart.” He encourages after a while, seeing my valiant struggle. “No, I wanted to talk to you about my next hypnosis session.” I say, forcing my eyes open. It’s been a week. The doctor said I could try again after a week.”

“Ella, we decided the next session would have to wait until I’m back.” Sinclair reminds me, recalling the conversation we’d had when I mentioned my interest in going back to Leon earlier this week. “No, you decided.” I sigh, “we need answers, Dominic.”

“Answers that can wait until you have the support you need to uncover them.” He insists. “I have Henry, and he might not be able to calm me the way you do, but you know it’s less painful for him than it is for you.” I argue.

“I’m not worried about my pain, I’m worried about your and Rafe’s wellbeing.” Sinclair states firmly. “But the damage is already done.” I claim fiercely. “There can’t be anything worse than having my wolf taken from me.”

“We don’t know that.” Sinclair grimaces, “and I’d hate to find out the hard way.”

“Dominic, plea-“

“No, Ella.” He cuts me off, raw authority in his deep voice. “We do it together, or not at all. Is that clear?” I swallow my protests and try to quell the rebellion churning in my blood. “Crystal.”

Chapter 185 – Ella Schemes

Ella

I gather Henry, Philippe and Gabriel just after lunch, careful not to hint about my motives for this meeting. Instead I ask them to come to my suite for a chat before returning to their regular daily tasks.

Naturally, as my personal guard Philippe would have been here anyway, but when Henry and Gabriel arrive and realize that this is a group discussion rather than a private audience, they automatically sense that something is up – and they're right. "What's on your mind, Ella?" Henry inquires, wheeling over to take a place beside me.

"I have to ask a favor of you all." I begin hesitantly, knowing that my next request isn't going to go over well at all. "And while I know this puts you in a very difficult position, I'd like to ask that this conversation remain between the four of us – whether you agree to help me or not."

Philippe stiffens, and Gabriel's sharp eyes search my face. "You're asking us not to tell Dominic?"

"Yes, but I swear that I have good reason." I insist, the words spilling out of me in a rush. "You all know what happened in my hypnosis session and how many questions it raised about my past. You know how unprecedented all of this is, and that the events I recalled suggest powerful forces at work." I take a steadying breath to try to stop my voice from shaking. "You must also realize the implications of all this, and how seriously the people are taking these rumors."

The men exchange wary glances. They may be among the few shifters in the palace not treating me like some sort of divine savior, but they'd have to be blind and deaf not to hear the whispers, or notice the worshipful gazes and gifts raining down on me from the pack.

"This is so much bigger than finding out who my parents were or why I was given up." I continue fervently. "If that were all it was then I wouldn't mind waiting -I didn't want to do this in the first place." I pause to laugh at the sheer irony of this – how quickly the tables have turned.

"What exactly are you asking, Ella?" Gabriel inquires, sounding genuinely curious rather than cautious.

"Dominic doesn't want me to do any more sessions without him, with good reason. The baby and I will cope better if he's present, and he'll be here to take care of me if things get difficult again." I acknowledge. "But it will also be more stress on him – far more than it is or any of you, because we aren't bonded. The bottom line is that Dominic can't

protect me from my past, and he's already got enough to worry about without his wolf going berserk because I have a bad memory and he can't fix it."

"That may be true, but I can tell you right now that this argument isn't going to hold water with us, Ella." Gabriel replies, even though there's a softness in Henry's eyes which I understand only too well. "You are Dominic's Luna, and interfering with any wolves' mate -let alone an Alpha's - is forbidden except in cases of abuse.

What's more, none of us would do or feel differently if it was our own mate in your shoes. I understand you have a tender heart and you're trying to protect him from unnecessary pain, but that would be a disservice to his wolf. It's the Alpha's duty to bear the brunt of the stress and pain for his people, because he has the strength to take it. He'll feel far worse if you do this and he wasn't here for you, than he will if you wait and let him support you through the process."

I glance between the wolves in front of me, who sit with their arms crossed over their chests and wear identical brooding expressions. I decide to change tracks. "Fine, we won't make it about Dominic." I amend. "Perhaps I should have started by saying that we can't afford to wait, regardless of any of our wishes.

If the people are right.. if things truly are the way they appear and the Goddess's servants hid me and bound my wolf to fulfill some prophecy in this war, then there isn't any time to waste. We need answers to these questions before we start planning a large-scale invasion, maybe before we even strike the alliance.

"Depending on what we find out, the secrets in my past might change the way we view our opponents. It may alter our entire strategy for the war. It would be folly to move forward with our plans when we know we're missing major pieces of the puzzle.

We owe it to our people to do everything we can to bring Damon down, and if I'm part of that then there is no justification for putting this off." I shrug. "Dominic isn't the only one with a duty to put the people above his own needs or desires. If I'm truly to be their Luna, I have to do the same.

The men look more uncertain now, exchanging resigned glances which give me hope I've finally gotten through to them. They know I'm right, even though they don't like it.

"What about the pup?" Henry questions, throwing out one final impediment to my plans. "This baby survived my first shift- hours of terror and agony that certainly should have killed him.

He got through the memory of having my wolf bound." I remind him, running my palm over my round belly. "I hate upsetting him more than any of you ever could, but he's his father's son. He's strong and healthy, and frankly I don't believe there can be anything

worse than what he's already overcome."

"And you?" Philippe questions, piercing me with a knowing gaze. "Your stress is the worst thing for the baby, don't you think it's worth waiting until you can do this under the best possible circumstances?" My stomach flutters. Philippe worried me more than Gabriel or Henry from the start, because he knows exactly how tormented I've been by the memories of my first session.

However he's also the one who I absolutely cannot do this without – since he's glued to my side nearly 24/7. In truth, I sought Gabriel and Henry's help to give Philippe permission to defy Sinclair, more than I did to bring them on board themselves.

I silently beg my guard not to reveal my nightmares to the others, saying, "Do you think it's less stressful for me to be floundering in the dark?"

Unsure of whether I might hold something in my memories that can change the course of the war?

Unsure of whether some new demon I didn't even know about is lurking somewhere in my consciousness?" I retort. "Yes, reliving painful things without my mate here is difficult, but it's not nearly as difficult as thinking I might ruin our chances to win this war."

I look down at my belly, wincing, "I love Rafe more than anything, but we're talking about the lives of millions of people. Millions of other children whose parents love them every bit as much as I love my son. Don't you think they're worth our risk?"

Philippe narrows his eyes, and I can see him digging in his heels. Henry and Gabriel, on the other hand, look grave and pensive. "We'll need to think about it, Ella." Gabriel sighs. "And whatever we decide, I don't think we should keep it from Dominic."

"He'll put a stop to it before it can even begin."

Henry interjects, surprising me. "She's right about that. When he makes up his mind there's no changing it.. and it's partly my fault that he's so set against this. I wasn't easy on him about how it went down the first time.... But that was before I understood what we're dealing with." He sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I'm not saying I like it. I agree that it's in all of our interests to pursue this sooner rather than later but I certainly don't approve of sneaking around behind my son's back to make it happen."

Thoroughly scolded, I drop my eyes to my lap. "It's not that I don't believe it's wrong. I do. I know how shitty it is for me to even suggest, but I'm willing to pay the price to my mate. He'll be furious with me, but if it helps the pack then it will be worth it.

The stakes are just too high." I murmur, "Besides, this is my life we're talking about- I

have a right to find out where I came from and that isn't anything anyone else can dictate, not even Dominic"

Before they can say another word, the door swings open and Roger strides in, looking grave. Isabel trails behind him, baby Sadie in her arms. "We've got a problem." Roger announces. "The daily shuttle from the continent never arrived. there's a chance Damon has compromised our refugee operation."

Chapter 186 – James' Revelation

Ella

I look back and forth between Roger and Isabel, noting her pallid skin tone and his quiet concern. "How long overdue is the plane?" I inquire, checking the time on my phone.

"It was supposed to get in five hours ago. James has never been late before." Isabel pipes up, bouncing Sadie in her arms and visibly trying to control the tremors of fear wracking her body. I rise from my chair and attempt to put an arm around her, but she jerks away from my touch like a skittish horse. Sighing, I drop my hand.

"Is it possible there weren't any refugees needing to make the journey today?" Henry asks, logical as ever.

"We haven't had a single day without a new batch." Gabriel answers grimly, "the wait list back on the continent is a mile long. If he didn't come today, then something has gone wrong."

"Is the news out of the continent still blacked out?" I question, even though I already know the answer. Damon shut such a tight lid on the media that the only information available to us anymore is brought by refugees and spies.

"Yes." Gabriel replies, with the same dark expression. "I'll see if I can tap into our spy network. I have a few people stationed around the egress points on the coast. But to be frank the fact that they haven't reported in either doesn't bode well."

"What do we do?" Isabel frets aloud, looking hopefully at the King. "Can you stage a rescue mission?"

"We can't go in blind." Philippe declares evenly.

We need to know what we're dealing with before we send relief troops or more aircraft."

"But if the camps on the coast are under attack then they need your help now." Isabel argues, swinging her frantic gaze to me, "Ella, do something!"

"We will." I promise, resisting the urge to reach for her again. "We're not going to just leave our people to fend for themselves, but Philippe is right, if we charge in blind then not only do we risk failure, but we risk losing even more people than were already in danger."

"But there's no time!" Isabel insists. "They could be dead already." Even though she says they, I can hear the secret fear she won't allow herself to voice. She means he could be dead already. He James, the soldier who rescued Sadie and delivered frightened

orphans to the safety of Isabel's nursery every day, who comforted the aloof she-wolf despite her ferocious protests. I'd known she was becoming attached to him, but I hadn't realized quite how far she's already fallen. I say a silent prayer to the Goddess for the man's safety, to spare my cranky friend more pain if nothing else.

"I know." I tell her gently, "but we don't have many options here, Isabel."

"Don't look at me that way!" She snaps, cuddling Sadie closer. "Like I'm some hysterical woman who can't see reason. I'm not fragile and I don't need your pity."

I cross my arms over my chest, an instinctive growl bubbling to life in my chest. Isabel jolts, her wolf reflexively quivering in the face of my warning, "That's not what I'm doing, and lashing out at me isn't going to bring him home any faster." I state calmly.

Her eyes widen slightly, and then she deflates, submitting to my dominance. "I know, I'm sorry...I just..."

"I know." I assure her, finally sliding my arm around her shoulder and leading her from the room. "We'll get through it, whatever happens."

We're only halfway back to the nursery when Roger comes racing up behind us, "We just got word, James's plane is about to land."

Isabel jerks her head up, "what?"

"We don't know what happened, but he just called in clearance to land." Roger explains, Henry, Gabriel and Philippe joining us as we change direction. We all pile into the King's car and speed towards the airfield. Isabel is shaking with relief beside me, and I try to lean against her for comfort without letting her realize what I'm doing. She glares at me but leans into my warmth despite her thorny demeanor.

We arrive just as James's plane is taxiing down the runway, and when the cargo bay opens, a rush of refugees pour forth, more numerous than any arrival to date. I immediately sense that something has gone terribly wrong back home – worse even than before. There are too many people, and the looks on their faces break my heart. These aren't the panicked but hopeful expressions of relief at a long journey's end, but the hollow-eyed numbness of those that have seen too many horrors to feel anything anymore.

James is the last off the plane, and though Isabel runs half the distance to him, she seems to stop when she realizes what she was doing. Luckily he isn't shy about his affection, and he pulls Isabel and Sadie into his arms as soon as they're in reach. Sadie cuddles him happily, but Isabel pushes at his chest with a look of sullen detachment on her pretty features. "Where were you? What took so long?" She demands, her tone more

harsh for all the hurt and fear she's trying to mask.

James growls and tugs her closer, burying his head in her neck. She allows him this much, though she still has the sulky energy of a she-wolf who is determined not to be mollified. James purrs, and she finally relents, melting into his arms. I look away, knowing she wouldn't want her private moment observed.

I turn my attention to the refugees, who ebb forward as if in a trance. The triage tent separates the injured from the unharmed, individuals from families and unaccompanied children from temporary guardians. I go to assist with the intake process, trying to offer what comfort I can.

I lead a couple with minor injuries to the medical tent, and Cora meets me in the doorway with wide eyes. "What's happened?"

"I don't know." I sigh, "but it isn't good."

"The Usurper..." The she-wolf beside me mutters, searching my face for understanding. "Damon, he broke the pact."

Cora and I exchange confused glances. "What pact?" I'm glad that my sister asks, because as Luna I should probably know about the major treaties and agreements governing shifter society.

"The secrecy pact." Her mate explains gruffly, though this doesn't actually clear things up for us.

I don't know if he grew too ambitious and lost control, or if this was part of his plan all along... but it's done now... the entire continent is on fire... the revolution is in shambles... nothing will ever be the same."

His words strike fear into my heart, but I still don't understand them. I don't know about any secrecy pact, but I don't want to force these weary wolves to explain things when they need to be focused on healing. "It's okay." I murmur, "go with Cora here and she'll get you cleaned up, there will be plenty of time to talk later."

I return to the triage tent, but when I see Gabriel and Henry huddled with James near his plane, I can't stay away. I return to their side, noting that while Isabel is taking charge of unaccompanied pups, her eyes are locked on the pilot. I approach behind them, just in time to hear James saying, his army breached the borders in broad daylight – fully shifted, and set upon the humans. It seems Damon is done with shadow tactics that can be explained away by weapons or natural disasters."

"You think it was intentional?" Gabriel demands, sounding as serious as I've ever heard

him. "Not some sort of military exercise gone terribly wrong?"

An attempt to work with rogues who betrayed him?"

"From what I can tell it was a calculated assault."

James confirms, "I've never seen anything like it."

"What's happening?" I finally interrupt, pushing into the circle. "Someone mentioned a secrecy pact, and you're saying Damon attacked the humans?"

"Yes," James accedes, glancing anxiously towards Isabel and Sadie.

"The secrecy pact is what bound shifter society from coming out in the open in the lands we share with humans." Henry explains, squeezing my hand. "It's a treaty the united peaks formed in the earliest days of our existence, to preserve the safety of our people and preserve the cultures of both worlds."

Understanding clicks into place, and my mouth drops open. "You're saying that all the humans back home just found out that werewolves are real? Because Damon was too stupid or too greedy to maintain the pact?"

"Exactly." Gabriel nods, "Our two worlds just collided- with violent and devastating impact. My guess is that Damon seeks to enslave the humans as a lesser class of being, that he means to make them serve shifters in his empire."

"But it's not just our continent affected." Henry shares bleakly. "Damon just opened a can of worms for every country on the planet. People all around the world are waking up to discover that creatures from their worst nightmares are real and living among them- that they have more money, power and influence than any humans. The fallout is going to be unimaginable."

"It's already utter chaos." James reports gravely."

Everyone, both shifters and humans are in a fault on panic, and there's no controlling it. That's why I was so late, I was trying to lead people to the coast but every ten feet we'd have to stop and hid from roving war parties belonging to both sides, and then more people would turn up begging to join us.

I've never seen anything like it."

"I can't believe this" I breathe, feeling my knees go weak.

"Believe it." Gabriel said, without ire. "This changes everything. And I think you were

right, Ella.” The King is looking at me with determined calm. “We can’t afford to waste a single moment in this war. If there are things in your past that can give us answers... we need to find them as soon as possible.”

Chapter 187 – Fallout

Sinclair

I lean over the back of the sofa in my quest suite, my hands closed in white-knuckled fists around the frame. My phone is lit up on the table in front of me, Gabriel's name glowing on the screen. Hugo and the Black Alder Alpha, Callahan, stand beside me, looking on with somber expressions. "Talk to me. What do we know?"

"It's bad, Dom." The Vanaran King reports. "My spies say that all signs point to utter ruin. Civilians are fleeing the territories in droves, and the governments they're leaving behind are scrambling. The packs have all fallen to Damon, and the human regimes are considering extreme action to hold off the invasion."

"Do they not realize what they're up against?" I demand. "After all, the upper echelons of government have always known the secret, they know how far ahead our Societies are."

"And they've been planning contingencies." My father interjects. "Sovereigns from other continents are offering their aid, there's been talk of employing weapons of mass destruction... of secret laboratories working for decades on projects inventing next-gen arms capable of combatting our own. They've been preparing for this sort of eventuality since day one."

"And what have they come up with? Any weapon deadly to shifters will also be lethal to humans." I remind them.

"From what we can tell, even the best of their labs haven't come close to matching the sophistication of our technology." Philippe reveals. "They're at least fifty years behind. But that's less important than the likelihood that they'll deploy them anyway. Some we can stop and neutralize- others we shield against, but there are others still that we cannot defend against once they've been deployed, only try to mitigate the damage."

"I'm afraid things are reaching the point where the humans may very well decide to abandon their own people left under Damon's rule, for the sake of taking him out once and for all." Gabriel cautions, answering the second part of my question. "They see them as lost causes, collateral damage."

"That's unconscionable." I snarl. "What kind of leader would contemplate killing their subjects so indiscriminately, as if they're nothing more than pawns in some larger game?"

"It's containment." Ella chimes in, her sweet voice clashing with the harsh words. "They're panicking and they want to fight fire with fire. Damon isn't holding back no matter the impact on the shifters under his rule, and the humans are being faced with the choice between losing some of their populations, or having the entirety enslaved."

“As we said.” Roger sighs, “things are worse than we ever could have feared.”

“Are the pathways out of the continent still open?”

I inquire, trying to quell my wolf’s rabid energy.

Are we still able to bring refugees to Vanara?”

“We need more planes.” Dad replies. “One trip a day isn’t enough anymore, and we need to allocate more funding to supporting them once they arrive.”

“Authorize it.” I order, knowing my voice sounds harsh and biting, but unable to help it. “Has there been any word from packs on the other continents? What of the rebellion?”

“Dom, our spies are reporting all the same intel that Gabriel’s are.” Roger shares, “the rebellion is all but in shambles after this... there’s a strong undercurrent of anger and hope among our allies back home... they’re eager to fight, but right now our biggest concern is making sure they live to fight another day.”

“We’ve had word from the Veran King.” Gabriel adds, referring to the continent west of Vanara.

He’s eager to speak with you. Things haven’t devolved to violence there or in Sevka, but the humans are in an uproar around the world. They’re anxious about our future.. they’re willing to offer any help they can to get this under control.”

“Thank the Goddess for that.” I breathe, even though I don’t have the first idea how to do such a thing. The only thing that comes to mind is inventing a time machine and going back to kit Damon before he ever got a chance to put any of his diabolical plans in motion. If I hadn’t been such a noble a.ss we could have avoided all this.

“What are your orders, Alpha?” Philippe inquires, his voice full of belief that I will have some sort of answer. I’m grateful for him, but also at a loss.

“Ella?” I ask, wishing I could see her. “You know the ways of humans far better than we do. Do you have any thoughts?”

There’s a short pause, and then her silken voice floats up from the device. “People are afraid, and right now they see us as their enemies... as monsters from horror films who are all cut from the same cloth as Damon. I think the best thing we can do is show them that they aren’t suffering alone. Show them that Damon does not reflect all shifters, and that our people don’t want him in power any more than they do.” Another pause, and I can imagine my mate’s beautiful face scrunched up in deep thought. “I think we should

extend our rescue operations to include human civilians.

Reach out to every state and local government you can to offer aid, whether it's money or resources, and publicize it. We need shifter allies, but I think human allies might be even more urgent now."

"Well put." Dad praises, "we need to combine PR with diplomacy and hard line action. This isn't just our fight anymore."

"Do it." I agree. "I trust you all, authorize whatever funds and resources we can, and put out feelers to contacts throughout the continent. Forward me any correspondence for approval before sending it out, and have our spies start spreading the word on the ground. Half of Damon's strategy is propaganda and fear mongering, we can counter it with a whisper campaign of our own. Don't let people lose hope, don't let Damon convince them we're enemies. Print up flyers supporting the rebellion if we need to, whatever it takes."

There are a few mumbled agreements, and when a hush falls I turn my attention to the person I want to speak with most. "Can I have a minute alone with my mate please?" I request, though it's actually an order. I listen as the men on Ella's end of the line shuffle out, and wait for the Black Alder Alpha and Hugo to leave as well.

When we're finally alone, I ask. "How are you holding up, trouble?"

"I'm a little overwhelmed." She admits in a soft voice, "I never imagined this could happen."

"I don't think any of us believed Damon would be so reckless." I share, feeling more at ease now that we can speak one on one. "I always knew it would be a disaster if he came to power, but I have to confess this is so much worse than I feared." I don't add that I hate not being able to fix it, because she already knows. "I need to see you tonight."

"I'll try my best." Ella promises with true longing, as though she wants nothing more herself. "I've just been so tired with all the summon it planning and the refugees. I'm out the second my head hits the pillow."

"I know baby." I sigh, feeling guilty even though I know a dream date would comfort us both. "I suppose I shouldn't keep you half awake in dreams all night anyway... I just miss you."

"I miss you too, so does Rafe." Ella relates, "He asks for you- in his own way – about ten times a day."

“Maybe I can record some purrs for you both, so it can feel like I’m there even when I’m not.” I suggest.

Ella’s breath catches, and I wonder if she’s been struggling even more than she admits. “I’d love that.”

“Then it’s done. As soon as we’re off the phone.” I vow, wanting nothing more than to spend the rest of our call talking about each other and our pup, but knowing there’s still some business left to cover. “How are plans for the summit going?”

“Well, for the most part.” Ella reports. “Everyone’s looking forward to the ball and Roger is helping me plan some especially sneaky events to win over the reluctant Alphas. Though we’re going to have to reevaluate a few things now.” She pauses, sounding wistful. “And the Black Alder pack?”

“Alpha Callahan was reluctant to join us this morning.” I say ruefully, “but it seems he’s had a change of heart, what with the pact being broken expect the Alphas here are going to be much more motivated to help us now, as shifters living among humans are probably going to be looking for an escape – and what better place than the hidden territories?” I glance at the door, recalling the tense conversation I’d shared with the Black Alder Alpha Over breakfast. “Vanara is the last place on earth shifters Can exist in secret now, and for the first time in the history of the hidden territories, their own society is at risk because of events in the rest of the world. It’s an important wake-up call.”

“Then maybe some good can come out of all this pain.” Ella assesses sorrowfully.

“I hope so.” I agree, wishing I could wrap my arms around her, breathe in her wonderful scent.”But for now we just have to wait and see. This is a new world we’re living in, and if we can save it then it will be up to us to build a new, hybrid society unlike anything before seen in history.”

“And if we can’t?” My precious mate squeaks.

“Im not going to let that happen, Ella.” I remark firmly. “Il die first.”

Chapter 188 – Henry Researches

Ella

After hanging up with Sinclair, I return the King's cell phone and look around at the gathered men." When does Leon arrive?" I inquire, forcing down a shiver. "Within the hour." Gabriel replies, solemn-faced.

Though they'd all agreed that the developments back home warranted accelerating my hypnosis sessions, none of them are happy about keeping them secret. I'm not happy about it either, but I'm also dreading another traumatizing visit to my past.

"Before he arrives I think we should take some blood samples from you, Ella." Henry suggests. "I know the doctors in Moon Valley didn't find any genetic matches for you, but there's a chance that we can trace your ancestry by looking at genetic traits which have historically been documented in certain bloodlines. It won't help us if the inherited genes aren't expressed through ancestral phenotypes, but certain markers in your DNA might still allow us to draw important connections"

"But surely that would only work if my ancestors come from a bloodline deemed worth documenting." I object uncertainly. "I mean if I come from a long line of nobodies then there won't be anything to find."

Phillippe, Henry, Gabriel and Roger exchange meaningful glances. They appear to have a full on silent conversation, trading shrugs and expressions as if batting the responsibility of answering back and forth between one another. "

What?" I finally prompt them, feeling exasperated.

"It's just, Ella," Roger sighs, "it's highly unlikely that you come from random nobodies. It's not impossible, but the fact that you survived having your wolf bound and have proven yourself a match for Dominic... that indicated a level of power that has to be passed down over centuries, getting stronger with every generation. It would explain why the Goddess chose you.. she blessed certain wolves with more magic than others from the beginning."

I look between them curiously. "Does that mean that all of you have the same sort of lineage?" I inquire, "Given that you're among the most powerful Alphas alive today?"

"That's exactly what it means." Henry confirms, not sounding the least bit boastful. "The Sinclairs, Gabriel's bloodline, even Phillippe, they're all incredibly distinguished and can be traced back to the first wolves."

I cross my arms over my chest. "That hardly seems then what, you're doomed to be poor and powerless?"

“That isn’t how it works.” Gabriel chuckles. “Plenty of other traits prove more useful than brute strength, which is why some other bloodlines have died out because so-called weaker wolves outsmarted them. And the fact remains that fair or not, this might hold some clues to your past, so isn’t this worth exploring.”

Suddenly the little girl who asked me if I’m a princess pops into my head, and I grapple with the discomfort of this idea. “I guess, though I don’t think I like the idea of being part of a long line of snobby elites.”

“Oh come on,” Roger jokes, “we’re not all that bad.”

I manage a small smile for his joke, but I grumble the entire way through the blood draw. When the doctor departs I try to sneak in a power nap before Leon arrives, much good that it does me. I end up lying awake and staring at the ceiling, dreading the session about to come. I tried to tell myself it would be okay, but I knew better... and I was right.

Half an hour later I’m in the familiar drug-induced stupor of the ether, the world swirling around me in a hallucinogenic haze. Henry’s hands are warm around mine, and I try to focus on the good feelings, rather than the walls coming down in my mind.

“All right Ella, last time we were here you recalled being visited by a couple of priests when you were a girl. I understand that was a somewhat traumatic memory for you.” Leon begins gently.

“That’s putting it mildly.” Henry mutters under his breath, and I squeeze his hand to let him know I’m okay.

“Yes.” I answer, delighting in the starbursts dancing across my dark eyelids.

“I want to ask you if you ever saw or spoke with those men again?” Leon inquires. “Can you recall meeting other men or women in similar clothing, who spoke about things you didn’t understand?”

I breathe deeply and try to focus, recalling their wrinkled faces while trying to hold off the feelings evoked by that particular memory. I’d been ready to say no, but the more I focus on the details of their robes and the timbres of their voices, I realize that isn’t true. “Yes.” I say, even as I realize it. “I did see them again.”

“When?” Leon inquires, as nonchalantly as if we’re talking about the weather.

“I... I don’t know.” I stammer, not really wanting to move deeper into the possibility – after all, if my first incident with them resulted in the binding of my wolf, I’m not eager to find out what might have come next.

“Don’t resist the ether, Ella.” Leon advises. “Just let it carry you. I know it’s not easy, but we need to know this. This is all to help the pack, remember?”

I squeak my assent, trying to refocus myself as he continues, “try to picture the setting. Where were they when you saw them again, what were they doing?”

Flashes of a dark forest burst into my thoughts, followed by the sound of my feet crashing through the undergrowth, my heart pounding in my ears as adrenaline floods my veins. I have to get away. I think frantically. I can’t let them catch me! Just keep going, don’t stop.

“There’s someone chasing me.” I gasp, understanding setting in as my breath comes in pants. There is no light in the woods save the moon, and as I race away from the monster at my back, I see the priests standing amidst the towering trees... watching... making no move to help me.

“Try going further back, Ella. Who is chasing you?”

“Why did you start running?” Leon prompts, in the same calm tone.

As soon as he says it, I’m transported to a dim alleyway a few miles from the orphanage. I’m thirteen, and it’s the first summer that Cora and I attempted to live on the streets. After fleeing the orphanage and the Doctor’s abuse, we’d lasted two whole months picking pockets and hustling to keep our bellies full. We’d slowly learned the tricks of the trade – how to stay hidden from the authorities and enterprising gangs who might recruit us; how to hide our shelters out of sight and stay warm on the cooler nights; even how to navigate some of the city’s secret closes and corridors to get around.

Everything was fine until this night, when we’d been on our way back to our current home base after breaking into the public bath houses for some stolen showers. Our hair was wet and dripping, and we were giggling up a storm, still riding high on the excitement of our scheme. “I think we should do this at least once a week – their security is so weak I doubt they’ll ever notice.” I laugh.

“Every week, how about every day!” Cora suggests, her cheeks clean and rosy for the first time in too many days.

“Now that’s playing with fire.” A deep voice sounded behind us.

We both whipped around, our eyes going wide as we took in the sight of two huge men towering over our slight bodies. “You take risks too often and you’re just asking to get caught.” The second man agreed, a hungry glint in his eyes.

Cora and I began backing away, both sensing that whatever these men wanted, it wasn't good. My mind was fighting to stay in the present, immediately consumed with the doctor's last attack... the pain, violation and shame of having him on top of me.

"Ella!" Cora shook me back to the present, and the first man offered up a sickly smile. "What a pretty name. Don't be scared, honey, we just want to have a bit of fun."

My first thought was to find some way to lure them away from Cora, and I turned and hissed in her ear, "Run. Run and hide, I'll lead them away."

"Ella no!" She gasped, "I can't -"

"I won't let them catch me, you know how fast I am." I promised. "Now go." Looking uncertain, Cora turned on her heel and darted away. The second man started to go after her, but I reached out a hand to block him. "Wait, you don't need her. Leave her be and I'll do whatever you want."

"Is that so?" The first man asked, smirking. "Do you have any idea what we want, beautiful?"

"I can guess. " I replied, trying to make my voice steady while silently counting how many seconds had passed since Cora ran.

"What do you think?" The second man asked.

"Well she'll certainly bring the higher price, and you know the customers prefer a willing slut." He glanced in the direction Cora had run. "She's gone anyway." He assessed, turning back to me. "Alright girly, why don't you prove yourself to us, otherwise we start looking for your little friend."

I had to hope that Cora had enough time to escape, and I hadn't missed their comment about me fetching a higher price. "Sure," I grinned, "You'll just have to catch me first."

Chapter 189 – The Dagger

Ella

I turn on my heel and run away as fast as my feet will carry me. My would-be kidnappers curse and soon their footsteps are pounding into the pavement behind me. I fly through the sleeping city, careful to make sure I travel in the opposite direction Cora ran.

I hadn't been sure they'd both follow me when another target was still within reach, but it seems their outrage over being duped by a little girl was strong enough to make them focus on me.

I know I need to find some place to hide, or some way to lose them. I'm small and fast, but my pursuers have longer legs and are probably in much better shape than I am. I can't remember the last time I ate, let alone the last time I exercised for any reason other than survival. I turn towards the park in the center of the valley – the trees are dense and there's little to no light, plus I've always had a talent for seeing in the darkness... at least I used to.

My adrenaline pushes me to sprint away from the men, even though my head is telling me to pace myself. I don't risk looking over my shoulder, I simply run until my lungs are burning and my sides are splitting with cramps. Still, I don't let myself slow down. I push through the pain and exhaustion, forcing myself to take longer strides, to move faster still.

I feel a slight flash of relief, when I reach the forest, bounding into the cover of the trees and veering away from the path. I leap over fallen logs and plow through the thick undergrowth, wondering if I should keep running or attempt to climb a tree.

An angry shout sounds behind me, and I realize my pursuers are closer than I knew. My heart stutters with raw panic, but I keep going, panting with the effort of drawing air.

Blood rushes in my ears, and though I can feel branches and thorns scraping my legs, I don't feel any pain. My frantic brain hallucinates the sound of a wolf howling in the distance, then two more join the cry and my eyes flit around the woods, searching for unseen predators. We're deep in the forest now, and all at once I realize this was the worst possible place I could have chosen to flee.

I've always felt safe in the forest, but it seems my eyesight is not as sharp as I remember amidst this pitch blackness, and I've led my attackers away from the bustling city – from any witnesses or bystanders that might step in to help me.

I'm slowing down, no matter how hard I try to carry on. I was running on fumes to begin with, and my adrenaline can only do so much. No! I think frantically, keep going! If they catch you it's all over. They'll sell you to a brothel or to some monster like the Doctor. No

one will be left to protect Cora. You have to fight!

A final burst of energy gives me a fleeting sense of hope. I pick up speed once more, but in doing so I move too fast to adequately take in my surroundings. My foot catches on a protruding rock, and I tumble to the ground, rolling and crashing through the undergrowth. I finally come to a stop, sprawled on my back and gasping for air.

I'm bruised and bleeding, and I feel as if I've been punched in the stomach, my lungs temporarily frozen in shock.

My attackers loom above me then, panting for breath but looking down at me with sickening smiles. "Now look at what you've done, you stupid girl." The first remarks, "How are we supposed to get a good price for you when you're all marked up this way? Hmm?"

His partner smirks, "At this rate it will be a week before we can take her to auction, so there's really no reason to be delicate with her. We might as well test the merchandise."

"I agree." The first leers, "The little b!tch was asking for it, besides I doubt a pretty thing like this is still pure anyw ay. You remember how she offered herself up for her friend. The little hussy is just gagging for it."

"Then let's not disappoint her." The second declares, reaching for his belt. "Don't worry slut, we'll make this good for you – as long as you don't fight."

Tears burn in my eyes. I know what happens next

..I know I can survive it, but I don't want to. I don't want to be hurt that way again, and their cruel words fill me with a well of humiliation deeper than I can fathom. It's not my fault I'm not pure, it's not my fault I look this way.. it isn't fair. What have I done to deserve this? Haven't I suffered enough in my short life?

I choke back a sob, I don't know what to do. if I fight them they'll hurt me worse, and if I don't they'll insist that I like it. I look around the forest, searching for some escape, some last ditch rescue.

I freeze when I see two robed figures a dozen meters away, illuminated in a shaft of moonlight between the trees. I don't recognize the men, and yet they seem strangely familiar. They stand there motionless, their hands clasped as they watch the scene with my kidnapers unfold. Their wrinkled faces are drawn in frowns, but they don't make a sound. They don't move to help me, or acknowledge my terror... they simply watch.

"What is she looking at?" The first man grumbles, sounding annoyed that my full attention isn't on them.

“I don’t know, there’s nothing there.” The second mutters in frustration. I can’t focus enough to comprehend that they can’t see the strange men, I’m still staring at the pair with desperation, silently begging them to help me but still too afraid to scream. I know they see me. They’re looking right at me – so why aren’t they acting?

Surely they don’t think I’m here willingly. I hear a whoosh of air, and then a sickening crack as pain explodes across my cheekbone. I hear myself cry out, even though I hate giving them the satisfaction. My vision goes black for a moment, then fills with stars as I blink up at the men in confusion. Any hope I’d kept alive dies as I accept the fact that no rescue is in store for me. They’re going to r.ape me, and then they’re going to sell me to be a.bused over and over again.. possibly for the rest of my life.

The gravity, the reality of that future slams into me, and suddenly my stomach is rising into my throat. I vomit onto the ground beside me, and the men leap back in disgust. “You idiot, you hit her too hard”

“Just drag her over here, I don’t want to get it on me.” The other orders.

Someone lifts my feet, and then I’m being wrenched across the cold, hard earth like a ragdoll.

I blink up at the sky, wishing to leave my body, to be knocked unconscious so that if I must be violated, I won’t have to remember it. Then something glints in my periphery, like silver and starlight. It’s just a flash, buried among the leaf litter and coarse woody debris of the forest floor.

My focus locks onto it, and the closer I look, I recognize the hilt of a dagger. The weapon is unlike anything I’ve ever seen – not the simple blades included in multipurpose tools or even the jagged knives used by hunters. This looks like something out of a museum. Jewels are imbedded in the hilt, and though I can’t see the blade, I instinctively sense that it’s sharp enough to slice through steel.

I reach for it, trying not to telegraph my movements as the first man wrenches my legs apart and rips at my clothes. My fingers close around the cold metal, and I act before I can even think. My body is in survival mode – I’ve tried flight, and now all that’s left is fight. After all, it’s not like I have anything to lose. I slash the dagger across the first man’s throat, watching his flesh rip open with detached horror. It took more strength than I expected, but I managed, and now his hot, crimson bl00d is gushing out as he gurgles and claws at his neck.

The second man j.erks around in shock, wide eyed.

“What – Steven!” He leans down to try to apply pressure to his friend’s wound, clearly

more concerned with saving the man than identifying the threat which caused this damage. "What... how

As soon as his eyes slide to me I strike again, burying the blade in the side of his neck until the tip protrudes from the other side of his throat. I rip it free and stab again, before scrambling back on my hands and feet. The second man collapses atop the first, though he still reaches for me, "you little b!tch."

"Are those really the words you want for your last?"

I manage to spit, drawing strength from some unknown source. He opens his mouth again, but nothing comes out. I watch as the light drains from their eyes, before finally looking back to the robed men. They nod their approval, and the first sets a bundle of cloth on a log by his feet. They turn on their heels and stride back through the trees, disappearing from sight.

My limbs are trembling violently, and when I look back to the dead men, I discover that the knife has disappeared. I'm alone in the forest with two dead bodies, covered in blood and my own vomit. But I'm alive, and other than some bruises, I'm unharmed.

I shakily rise to my feet, though it takes a few tries.

I move forward in a trance, investigating the bundle the robed man left behind. It's a fresh change of clothes and a bottle of water. Moving on autopilot I wash away as much of the gore as I can and change, knowing that if I return home to Cora this way, she'll be traumatized. After, I walk out of the forest as if nothing happened, and the strangest part of all is that the closer I come to the edge, the less I remember.

By the time I emerge I can't recall anything at all, and when my sister asks I can only answer that I lost our attackers... and as far as I know, it's the truth.

Chapter 190 – Tested

Ella

When I return to the present, the room is completely silent. Henry is still holding my hand, though he also holds a bucket in case I need to be sick. Leon is watching me closely, as if trying to decipher my mental state. Gabriel, Philippe and Roger look on from the doorway in a horrified hush.

I hadn't been wild about having them here with me during such a vulnerable time, but in the end we agreed that we needed as many brains on the case as possible. Besides, I'm discovering that I don't really mind having so many friends on hand this really is a strange new world for me.

"Do you want me to bring you out of the ether, Ella?" Leon finally asks, and I realize that he hadn't been forced to give me the antidote this time. I'm still floating along under the influence of the drug, still in the safe embrace of the high despite the horrible things I've just remembered.

I'm not feeling yet, not processing, and I don't think I want I shake my" updated by jobnib.com" head in refusal, moving my hand to my belly. The baby reaches out to me through our bond, uncertain and afraid. Had he understood my fear, my helplessness? Or did all he knew was that I was suffering? "Can I have something nice?" I request, not truly knowing what I want or need. "

Something for the baby?" "I have just the thing," Henry replies, pulling out his phone. He presses a button, and then the sound of Sinclair's purrs fills the air. I forgot I'd sent him the recording my mate provided earlier today, but now I'm beyond glad of it. Rafe and I instantly calm, and though longing for Sinclair tugs viciously at my heart, I sink deeper into the plush sofa and try to lose myself in the cozy sound.

"Anything else?" Henry inquires, stroking my hair. "Do we have any popsicles?" I sniffle, and for the first time I realize my cheeks are soaked with tears. For a moment I revel in the sensation of the salty moisture on my skin, of the burning in my eyes.

Everything seems so different in this state, and I could spend hours exploring the feelings – if only I didn't have to dig into my past as well. "I'll check the kitchens, and if they're out I'll get some." Roger promises, slipping out of the room.

"Let's talk about what just happened." Leon suggests once I've relaxed. Of course, this is the last thing I want to do, now that the memory is over I want to leave it in the past where it belongs

"Do we have to?" I inquire in a small voice, trying to disappear into the couch. Stupid sofa, my wolf thinks, I want my nest, why do we keep doing this here? It's all lumpy and

there aren't nearly enough pillows Where am I supposed to be now?

"I think we should." Leon answers gently, interrupting my inner animal. "We didn't talk about our last session because it was so distressing, but you seem to be steadier now." He pauses, and when I don't respond he continues. "I know you're only doing this to find answers for the war, but my job isn't the answers, Ella – it's not even the war. My job is your mental health, it's helping you understand and deal with the things we discover in a productive way."

"Dominic wouldn't make me." I counter petulantly, reaching for Henry's phone so that I can balance the device on my tummy. The speaker thumps against my baby bump, the volume growing louder for my pup and allowing us both to feel the vibrations as if he were really here with us.

"I'm not sure that's true, little mother." Henry warns me, in that paternal voice that both warms my soul and annoys my wolf for being bossy. "I've been doing fine without this warlock's help."

I argue instead, and I hear Gabriel smother a snort of laughter. You tell him. My wolf encourages. Nosey wolf. Remind him that our mate could kill him with no more than his little finger if he wanted.

"Have you really?" Leon questions, not seeming the least bit bothered by my insult. "Just because you didn't remember these things, it doesn't mean they weren't hurting you – affecting the way you interact with the world."

"We don't have time for this." I insist. "I understand you want to help, but I'm more concerned with finding out who these priests are, why they keep turning up in my past."

"So you aren't bothered by the fact that you killed those men?" Leon prods curiously. "Did you know you were capable of such violence before, even in self defense? Did you imagine you would have such a skill for it?"

His words slice through me, and suddenly it feels as though I have ice in my veins. I did kill those men. I took their lives without a second thought, and with no remorse. They'd deserved it.. hadn't they? They were going to hurt me, rape me, sell me like chattel... but that doesn't change the fact that I murdered them. It's because of me that they no longer exist on this earth. Did they have families?

People who mourned them? Children I rendered fatherless – no! Stop this, it won't do any good. "Talking about it won't change the past." I insist. "

It's done. "You don't think it's worth exploring all the things you suffered because you didn't have your wolf to protect yourself, or because you were trying to protect the

people you love?" Leon presses, and my frustration grows. "If it were me I think I'd feel very angry with those priests for taking my magic from me, for standing by and just watching as those men assaulted me."

"But it wasn't you!" I snap, more fiercely than I intended. I'm outraged to realize how furious I am, just as he says. Still, I lash my anger at him, rather than acknowledging the truth of his words "They assaulted me, the priests took my wolf. Stop presuming to know how I feel."

"So tell me." Leon provokes, "tell me how you feel, Ella, and I won't presume. Roger returns then, and I hear the glorious crinkling of a popsicle wrapper. I accept the cold sweet eagerly, rejoicing as the flavors explode on my tongue. "Oh my goddess, this is the best thing I've ever tasted."

I know it's the ether talking, but even that awareness slips away a minute later when neon-colored visions of frOzen desserts appear on the ceiling above my head. While I get lost in the hallucination, I hear the others continue to talk.

The King sighs, and to my surprise, he speaks up in my defense. "Leon, I hate to say it because I know you were against haūing such a large audience in the first place, but if this is going to turn into a true therapy session then the rest of us probably shouldn't be here. As you said. that's not really why we came to you. If Ella doesn't want to do the work, you can't force her."

"I'm just trying to take care of my patient." Leon defends, sounding resigned. It's not safe or responsible to uncover these sorts of traumas with someone – only to cut out and leave them to deal with it on their own. It would be like a doctor performing surgery and then never doing any post-op checks or physical therapy. If Ella wants these answers, she needs to face them afterwards, not just ignore them."

"I understand." The King agrees, "And you're right, but these aren't regular circ.umstances."

"She's been through a lot." Henry adds, "And she's dealing with a lot now. I have to admit I worry what might happen if you start digging into all this when she's under so much stress as it is"

"The digging is already done." Leon corrects him "

These things aren't just going to go away. Do any of you know how she's actually been coping since the first session? How she's been feeling?"

"You know I can hear you." I pipe up, suddenly very conscious of Philippe opening his mouth and worried he'll rat me out about my nightmares. "I'm not a child and I might be

high but you don't have to talk about me as if I'm not here. It's very patronizing" I continue savoring my popsicle as I forge on. "I'm pretty sure I've already made my feelings on this clear – and I'm the patient, so it's my choice."

"Fine." Leon concedes, sounding annoyed and exasperated. "But mark my words, you're courting disaster." He strides over to me, and I blink up at the grumpy therapist. "Ella I hope you'll call me to talk when you come down from the ether. You can call me any time, when you're ready I'll be waiting" He departs without another word, and I look around at the gloomy faces of the remaining men.

"So what do we think?" Roger asks after a moment.

"What was that memory all about? Why would servants of the Goddess do such a thing?"

"They were testing her." Henry concludes grimly.

"Testing her for what?" Gabriel replies sounding confused.

"To see if she was worthy? If she could survive?"

Henry suggests, not sounding particularly confident with these explanations. "Perhaps to see if she was ready."

"For what?" The King presses.

"I have no idea, but I can tell you if they ever turn up again, I'm going to have some words for them."

Henry snarls.

"Do you think there's more? More memories like this?" Gabriel questions then.

Henry sounds about as enthusiastic as an executioner signing a death warrant. "I hate to say it, but I'm afraid there are."

Chapter 191 – Cora’s Advice

Ella

My nightmares were worse than ever before the night after my second session with Leon, and I wake thrashing in my nest, with Philippe hovering above me, shaking me vigorously. I shriek and recoil, and he backs away from me with his hands outstretched in apology. “It’s okay, I’m sorry.” He breathes, ‘I didn’t know how else to wake you.’”

I gulp in a few gasps of air, trying to calm my racing heart. Rafe sends flashes of concern through our bond, and I immediately grab my phone, turning on the recording of Sinclair’s purrs.

This is getting out of hand, Ella.” Philippe scolds, still standing over the bed.

I’ve got it under control.” I insist.

“You don’t.” He cuts, and I can’t, in good conscience, let this continue.”

(You’re my personal guard, Philippe.” I remind him in the sternest voice I can summon, “It’s a very intimate relationship and there has to be trust between us. You hear everything I do, everything I say – whether I’m sick to my stomach or on the phone with my mate. This is a private matter which you are only privy to because of your position and I have to be able to trust you won’t betray my privacy, otherwise this arrangement won’t work”

I may be your personal guard, but I still answer to the Alpha and he wouldn’t approve of this.”

Philippe counters, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You also agreed to help us with the hypnosis behind his back.” I remind him, Now do you want to tell him that I ordered you not to say a word about any of it and you obeyed out of respect for our relationship, or do you want to tell him you were fine with being disloyal to him only until you had reason to be disloyal to me?”

Philippe narrows his eyes, I don’t like you very much right now.

‘Right back at you.” I respond, clambering to my feet. “But I appreciate your honesty.”

He growls as I move towards the door. “Where are you going?”

To find someone cuddlier than you.” I toss back over my shoulder, pulling on my robe and feeling thankful that I’d gone against Sinclair’s wishes and continued wearing pajamas while he’s away. Of course, I know he’ll be disappointed that I missed another

dream date, but when I get lost in my night terrors, there's no way to find him. I pad through the halls to Cora's bedroom, not bothering to tap on the door before entering.

She stirs as I climb into bed with her, moaning sleepily, Ella?"

"Can I sleep with you?" I ask, snuggling up to her and sighing as her arms come around me.

"of course," She agrees without hesitation.

Though I'm surprised you don't want to be in your nest."

"Well I do." I confess, "I just want to be alone less."

Bad dreams?" She guesses, only too familiar with the phenomenon. I nod pitifully, and she takes me by the hand, "Come on, then."

Phillippe rolls his eyes when the door opens again and a bleary-eyed Cora leads me back to my rooms.

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I don't complain when she directs me back into my own bed and climbs in with me, and she doesn't bat an eye when I turn on Sinclair's purrs. «Thank you."

I murmur against her hair. I needed this."

I catch my sister smiling out of the corner of my eye, and I nudge her, What?"

"It's just... this is nice." Cora replies softly. "I mean I'm not happy you're having nightmares, I just like being the one to comfort you for once."

You comfort me all the time." I inform her defiantly.

(Not like this." She murmurs, "You were always the one to Scare away the monsters in our closet. "

(Yeah well, the monsters aren't staying in the closet anymore." I confess miserably.

Do you want to talk about it?" Cora inquires. I shake my head no, and I catch a note of exasperation in her voice. "You don't always have to be such a martyr, Ella. Suffering in silence doesn't help anyone, least of all yourself."

My muscles stiffen. "Is that what you think? That I enjoy playing the martyr? Sacrificing

myself to fulfill some self-righteous hero complex?)

(No, I know that's not the reason." She answers apologetically, "but whatever your motives, you do have a habit of hogging all the worst things in life for yourself. You always have."

There's an ironic note in her voice which tells me that she doesn't resent me for it, at least, not the way she had the last time we talked about this.

You're my sister, it's my job to hog the suffering to spare you."

"But I'm older, I'm supposed to be the one looking out for you. Do you have any idea how much I hated myself when we were growing up, how much I still do, because I wasn't strong enough to take care of you." I suspect Cora has done a lot of thinking since our fight earlier this year, because rather than accusing me of making her weak by coddling her, she's admitting that those feelings came from a place of self-doubt.

"It didn't matter that you were older. I'm a wolf." I argue.

"So what, you age in dog years?" She jibes.

...

No... I just, I was able to survive things you couldn't ...I don't add that I may have been destined to as well, the way things have been going with my hypnosis.

"But you lost your wolf." Cora declares, surprising me. "Do you think I didn't know?It's all over the palace Ella."

I know that now... then all I knew was that I couldn't stand to see the people I love hurt... I still can't." I muse aloud.

"It's not a bad thing to be selfish sometimes, Elle, to put yourself first every now and then. In fact, it's called self-care." Cora states, rubbing my back.

I've been plenty selfish lately." I confess, thinking of my behavior with Sinclair, and even my thoughtlessness about the human impact of our war, my failure to see how this tumult was affecting Cora. "And part of me enjoyed it, having someone who made me feel safe enough to explore all the things I never had a chance to be growing up.

Dominic has never faulted me – not at my b.rattiest or most needy, he guided me through it all with utter patience. But I think the time for that has passed." I conclude, clamping my eyes shut. "I have a baby on the way, and an entire pack looking to me as a leader now.)

But why does that mean you have to hurt yourself?"" Cora inquires. "Why does that mean you have to suffer?"

Because everyone is suffering right now and I'm not special because I have a powerful mate... if the people suffer, I suffer." I explain logically.

"That's all well and good, very noble." Cora assesses. "But how are you supposed to lead them if you're a basket case?"

I won't be permanently." I reason. Dominic will be back in a few weeks, and then I'll feel better."

(This is about so much more than Dominic, Ella."

Cora exhales heavily. "Feeling safe and loved is important. But it can't fix everything you're learning in these sessions, it can't erase everything you've repressed. Only you can do that. You can't keep running from the past and pretending like everything is fine – mark my words it will catch up to you."

I look up at her in surprise, because I haven't shared anything about my hypnosis sessions with her, and as far as anyone knows, there has only been one session. Did Roger say something?"

'No, you silly thing, Cora scoffs. "I'm your sister, I know how you operate."

"Right." I chuckle humorlessly. "silly me."

There's a pregnant pause, and then she asks, "Are you sure you aren't doing all this to punish yourself?"

'No... I'm not sure of anything." I murmur, "Not anymore. I don't even know who I am."

(You've never known that." Cora teases, kissing my cheek.

"Even a penniless orphan is an identity." I reply, "I can't even fall back on that anymore."

Poor darling." Cora croons, "You know if you want to complain about possibly finding out who you are after a lifetime of questions, you might want to do it to someone who isn't bound to die an orphan with all of theirs unanswered."

"Fair point." I giggle, squeezing her. We lie like that for a little while longer, our thoughts spinning with all the challenges facing us. Though Cora hasn't said it this evening, I know she feels as overwhelmed as I do. "What are we going to do, Cora? Everything's

such a mess.”

“We’re together, that’s all that matters.” She says, echoing the words I’ve used to comfort her a thousand times before. You and I can get through anything, we had a lifetime of practice, remember?”

I love you.” I profess gratefully.

“I love you too, now try to get some sleep. Cora advises. Things always look better in the morning.”

Chapter 192 – Isabel’s Plight

Ella

Things did not look better in the morning. At least, not for all the people back home in Moon Valley – shifter and human alike. With every day that passes, the worse the crisis grows, with refugees flooding out of the occupied territories and ever-rising death tolls. It feels insane that I’m one of the people in charge of solving this crisis, especially since I was just a Nanny a few months ago. It used to be that I would watch events like this unfold on the news and wonder what our world leaders were going to do to fix it... now I am one of those leaders.

The best I can do is take it one step at a time, and though I sometimes feel like I’m shirking my duties with the summit by focusing on the refugees so much, I feel like they need me most. It’s difficult, draining work, but it’s also more rewarding than I could imagine – even when things are tough.

And speaking of tough, there is one refugee in particular proving to be a tough nut to crack – not that this is surprising. “Isabel,” I chime, striding into the nursery. The she-wolf looks up from the diaper she’s changing, and her expression immediately becomes guarded.

Before I can reach her, a small herd of pups race forward to clamber around my legs, “Ella! Ella!”

There are fewer familiar faces here than before, since we’ve successfully placed a number of the orphans in foster homes. Still I continue coming every day to nap with the remaining children, and I love the time I spend with them.

“Luna.” Isabel greets me stiffly, carrying over the child she’d been tending. I’m surprised to see it isn’t Sadie, but when I search the room I spy James cradling the young girl by the fire, grinning down at her with obvious adoration. I can’t help but raise my brows, as far as I know Isabel doesn’t trust anyone with her precious charge, so it speaks volumes that she’s relinquished her to the soldier.

The King tells me you rejected another foster home for Sadie.” I explain, lifting one of the munchkins tugging at my skirt. “That’s seven families you’ve passed up, you realize.”

Isabel shrugs, not looking the least bit repentant. “I didn’t like the look of them.

“And what exactly did you find so objectionable?” I ask suspiciously – the woman has come up with countless inane excuses to reject potential fosters.

«The mother smelled of cleaning chemicals and their own pups looked as though they’d been kept in a bubble their whole lives.” Isabel explains haughtily.

“That mother works as a housekeeper, she can’t help smelling a bit like the tools of her trade.” I remind her, propping one hand on my hip and pinning her with a disapproving gaze. “Besides, two days ago you objected to a family because their pups had dirt on their shoes.”

“It’s about balance.” Isabel insists obstinately. “I don’t want Sadie to go to an unsanitary home, but I also don’t believe children should grow up in completely sterile conditions – how is she supposed to build an immune system?”

“I think you are determined to find problems with everyone we bring to you, because you don’t want to give Sadie up at all.” I state sternly. “And that’s okay. If you want to foster or adopt her yourself, I would be thrilled to help you do so. But don’t keep the baby in limbo. If you’re not going to commit to her then you need to give her to a family who will.”

I can’t adopt her.” Isabel mutters, all the blood draining from her face. “But why can’t I just keep her a while longer?”

“Isabel, ” I sigh gently. “Sadie lost her parents and she’s bonding to you more and more every day.

She’s getting used to her routine here and starting to feel comfortable in the nursery. Those are all good things if we can keep that going... but if we can’t... The last thing she needs is to get attached to another parent figure only to have them taken away.

That’s not what I want.” Isabel answers, her eyes shining as she looks toward the child in question.

James raises his head as if he senses her gaze, frowning when he sees her sorrowful features.

“Do you want to tell me why you’re so opposed to taking her in, when you obviously love her?” I prompt, sensing that I already know the answer.

“I don’t love her!” Isabel snaps defensively. “It’s not the same... I can’t...” She bites down on her lip, then glares at me. “Why are you doing this?”

(I’m trying to do what’s best for everyone – you included.” I share, “I want to see you happy, Isabel.

I know that feels impossible right now-)

“Shut up!” She cries, interrupting me and stomping her foot in fury.

A gasp goes around the pups, and the little one perched on my hip whispers, "She said a bad word!"

(You don't know what you're talking about – you have no idea what I've been through!" Isabel continues, pointing an outraged finger at me.

Happiness is... that's done for me! I can't ever have it again, nor should I! So get your annoyingly perfect nose out of my business and leave me alone!" With that she turns on her heel and storms off into her room. The door slams, and then the sound of her sobs float out to us.

I wipe tears out of my own eyes as the pup in my arms cuddles closer. "Is okay, don't cry."

(Why's Miss Isabel so sad?"" Another asks, looking up to me with wide eyes and the expectation that I hold all the answers.

Footsteps approach, and then Jame's voice murmurs, "Because Miss Isabel lost a baby and she misses her." He explains softly, easing Sadie into my arms. "Let me talk to her, okay?"

I nod, "I'll watch the pups."

I try not to listen as he follows the distraught she-wolf, but with my supernatural hearing, there's no avoiding this. The door opens then shuts, and I can imagine him standing over Isabel as she sprawls miserably on her bed.

"Go away." Isabel sobs pitifully, her voice muffled – perhaps by pillows.

"No." James counters firmly. We're going to talk about this, Isabel."

I don't want to." She objects, and I hear a soft thump as though she slammed her fist into the bedding.

"No, you just want to make yourself miserable."

James answers, and the bed squeaks as he sits down.

You think if you let yourself be happy then it means you didn't love your daughter. You think that adopting Sadie is the same as replacing her, forgetting her, as if loving another child would be disrespecting her memory."

"Because it would!" Isabel whines. "I don't want another pup, I want my Sophie!"

I know you do." James acknowledges in a low purr, But you want Sadie too. And more importantly, Sadie needs a mother. So if you can't do this for yourself, then do it for her."

Isabel just m0ans wordlessly, and James seems to lose his patience. Come here, you stubborn thing."

There's a slight scuffle, with feminine snarls and the snapping of teeth, but soon enough Isabel's struggles cease, her defiant limbs no doubt captured by the pilot's powerful arms. His steady voice continues, "If you want to honor Sophie, the best thing you can do is not let your love go to waste.

Imagine if this was the other way around, and you had died with your mate, and Sophie was all alone in the world ->

I wish I had." Isabel weeps, "I wish it had been me instead of her. It should have been me."

(I know." James croons, rocking her, kissing her hair. "But if Sophie were all alone in the world, you would want someone to love her as if she was their own.)

(I didn't protect her." The she-wolf keens, and I find myself choking back my own sobs, snuggling close to the pups around me as I recall the visceral pain of thinking I'd killed my baby. It gives me the barest bit of insight into how the other woman must be feeling, and the gravity of her grief tears me to pieces.

"But you can still protect Sadie." James proclaims, I promised her mother I would look after her, but I can't take her with me on evacuation runs, or wear a baby carrier into battle. So I left her with you because I knew there was n0 one better. I believed you would watch over her as well as her own parents. Are you going to prove me wrong, Isabel She hiccups, "You're not playing fair."

"And you need to understand that shutting off your heart is a greater disservice to your daughter's memory than anything else. As long as you hurt, as long as you miss her, your love lives on. But if you stop feeling, if you stop caring then you let that love go to waste." James advises.

"If I adopt her, does that mean you'll finally stop visiting ? Since your promise to her parents will have been fulfilled?" There's both hope and fear in Isabel's voice, as if she's trying to convince herself she doesn't want him around, even though she's afraid he might actually say yes.

(Not on your life." James chuckles, You can't get rid of me that easily, little wolf."

Well I'll adopt her anyway." Isabel agrees, sounding sullen. James purrs, and Isabel

grumbles in return, but the sound is soon replaced by a whimper, and I have a sneaking suspicion that he silenced her in the way of all bossy Alphas – with his lips, and tongue, and wickedly talented hands.

Chapter 193 – Sinclair’s Worries

Sinclair

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

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

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

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

“That’s not unheard of. Dream meetings take more energy than regular sleep -more brain power.”

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

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

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

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

“That’s not why I’m doing it.” I counter grumpily, and he shoots me a disbelieving glance. “At least, it’s not the only reason. There’s too much to do. I feel guilty every time I take even the smallest break.” “You and Ella are two sides of the same coin.”

Hugo laughs, “I think you both need to take a day off.” “A day off to do what?” I scowl, feeling irrationally annoyed with my Beta even though I know he’s only trying to help.

“Sightsee? Read a novel? While my people are dying?”

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

“That’s different.” I bite, baring my fangs at him. “Why?” Hugo demands. “Why is it okay for her to take care of herself, but not you?”

“Because I don’t have the luxury of burning out! If I do, then I compromise the entire fvcking war.” I burst out angrily.

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

I narrow my eyes at him, annoyance surging through my veins, “You know you can be a bl00dy prick sometimes.”

“Yeah, but I’m right.” Hugo snorts, not the least bit bothered by the insult. “Of course you are, that’s why it’s so damn irritating.” I chuckle, standing and clapping him on the shoulder. “Thank you, brother.”

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

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

“Just trying to catch up on the summit plans.” She explains. “Is everything okay? You’re early.”

“Everyth ing is just fine. I decided to take the night off, so you should too.” I order warmly. “But I have so much left to do.” Ella objects, sounding uncertain.

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

“But -“

“No buts, this is happening.” I command, leaving no room for argument. “Have you eaten

dinner?”

“Yes.” Ella answers, sounding only slightly sullen. “Did you have dessert?” I follow up, wishing she would turn on her damn camera so I can see her.

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

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

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

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

“I think you’re a bossy tyrant.” She answers tartly.

But I miss you, so I’ll be good just this once.”

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

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

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

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

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

Did someone say something?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She lifts her head meekly, “Is that even possible?”

“Nothing is impossible when it comes to us, baby.”

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

Chapter 194 – Sinclair Travels Through Dreams

Sinclair

When I arrive in the dream forest, I'm alone – as I have been almost every night since I left.

However, rather than calling for my mate as I usually do, by picturing her in my mind and willing her to come to me with the sheer force of my longing and determination, I send my power outward. I unleash the full force of my magic, spreading it as far and wide as I can, searching every inch of this enchanted plane of existence. It rolls off of me like a dense fog, ebbing past the limits of my own consciousness to delve through the mating bond and track Ella.

Dreams are strange this way: both closer to and more distant from reality, so that our souls can join when the Goddess's power is at its peak, even as doors to fantastical and surreal worlds swing wide. I don't know where my mate is, but as long as she is also in the realm of dreams, I know I can find her.

It isn't easy. It takes what feels like hours to finally sense her presence, to detect her heartbeat across the vast expanse of ethereal worlds. Finally I find her, though she is very, very far away. To reach her I must travel through dozens of different dreams: some my own, some Ella's, Some a combination of both. It's hard not to pause and get distracted, especially when I come across a shared imagination of us playing with our young son, or the depiction of peace in the united packs and our future on the throne. I'd like to stay in those fantasies forever, but to do so would be to abandon Ella in her time of need.

I also struggle when I come across a sensual vision of Ella and I roleplaying as little red riding hood and the big bad wolf, especially when I realize the dream is hers. Still I forge on, though I certainly make note of the idea for the future.

There are odd things too, like the giant frog telling fortunes for a call-in psychic hotline, or the pirate ship full of ballet-dancing vegetables. Others simply make me smile, like Ella's craving-driven fantasy of a real-life candy land, or my own childhood wish of riding a dragon as it flies through the air on great leathery wings.

Eventually I move through every variation of happy and bizarre dreams, until the sky darkens overhead and the road I'm traveling becomes harsh and cold. I know I'm entering the realm of nightmares now, and I brace myself for the horrors ahead. I ignore the haunting visions that tormented me as a child – the fire that killed my mother, the monsters hiding in my closet. I even manage to move past Ella's youthful terrors – things that would absolutely destroy me if I had to see them for myself.

Her heartbeat and scent draw me deeper and deeper into the darkness, until I can feel

her just around the next bend in the path. I expect to find my mate at the mercy of the priests who bound her wolf, but suddenly I find myself in a forest I know all too well – the one where I spent the best days of my childhood. Only this time it's not welcoming and magical, but a vile place full of terror and pain. When my mate finally comes into view, she is not a small girl wrapped in a fiery cocoon. Instead I see a half-starved teenager, injured and dirty, but fighting for her life as two human men bear down on her.

My wolf roars in my ears, and my vision goes red.

Ella

I'm back in the forest.. wolves howling in the distance... pounding footsteps hot on my heels.

Falling, tumbling... crashing into the earth over and over again.

It's happening all over again, the panting breath, the sickening smiles. "Now look at what you've done, you stupid girl."

Two robed figures in the darkness, illuminated in a shaft of moonlight between the trees. Searing pain across my cheek... the horrible knowledge that there is no escape from this violation.

Sickness... my body being dragged. a glint of silver in the leaves. My legs being wrenched apart and my clothes ripping... blind, thoughtless anger, aggression like I've never felt. Blood gushing over me, hot, sticky and metallic. It stains my skin, forever marking me like a grey tattoo, a reminder of what I've done.

Murderer... I'm a murderer... and the priests are still just watching. I try to swing the knife again, only this time my hand is empty. The dagger is gone. I scour the ground for my weapon, but it's gone. I look toward the priests as the second man bears down on me. "The knife!" I shout frantically. "

Where did it go!?"

This isn't right. In my memory I killed them both..I saved myself despite the cost of violence. The priests stay silent, and now the other man is forcing his way between my legs. No! Not this.. not after everything that's already happened. "Please, help me!" I scream, giving up any sense of pride, any bravery. "Please, don't let him do this!"

A fist slams into my face, "I'm going to make you pay for this, b!tch." My attacker snarls, gesturing to his dead friend.

"No – please!" I cry, "it wasn't supposed to happen this way, you should be dead."

“Well now you get to die.” His face comes into focus over mine, and I can see the pure, sadistic hatred in his eyes. His fingers dig into my flesh, holding me still as he unbuckles his belt. He lashes the leather across my face as it comes free, then uses it to gag me, silencing my screams.

“Ella!” A voice I’ve never heard... not yet at least. It’s deep and wonderful and fills me with warmth, completely out of place in this horrible place. And then there’s a great black wolf running towards me through the trees, and I understand. My attacker barely has time to turn before Sinclair clamps his fangs around his throat, ripping his spinal cord from his neck and tossing him aside. He shoves the dead man out of the way, and then he’s a man again, dropping onto his knees in front of me.

Sinclair takes my face in his hands, “I’m here, Ella.

You’re okay.”

“D-Domìnic?” I gasp, clinging to him with desperate relief. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, little one” He confirms, though his eyes look past me, to the robed figures in the distance. “It’s me. You’re safe”

“How did you find me?” I squeak, still in the hoarse voice of my younger self.

“Im your mate. Il always find you, remember?”

Sinclair croons.

He scoops me up into his arms and carries me back the way he came. As we move through the dreamland, the horrible forest of my nightmare slowly transforms. Gone is the blood and horror, the unwelcoming darkness that tormented me so terribly. It’s gradually replaced by the glittering woodland of our dream dates, and I feel myself changing too. No longer an injured, frightened little girl, but the woman I am today. I don’t know how long it takes, but Sinclair carries me all the way to our dream bed and climbs on, pulling me into his lap, “There now. I’ve got you, baby. It’s Over.

I can’t believe this. I didn’t really believe Sinclair could follow me through dreams, let alone understand how such a thing was possible. But that doesn’t matter now. The moment I feel his muscular arms around me, breathe in his scent, and feel the rumble of his purrs, I unravel. I collapse against him and pour out all the emotions I’ve been grappling with these past weeks – all the horror, fear and pain. All the confusion, helplessness, and guilt. If I had control of myself I might try to hold some of it back from Sinclair, but I’m beyond that sort of limitation now. Everything is pouring through our bond, and I can feel his sorrow, rage and love rushing back towards me.

He rocks me back and forth, kissing and petting me, whispering sweet nothings in my ear. I cling to him like a raft in stormy seas, and for the first time since that first terrible hypnosis session, I feel as though I'm not completely adrift. Why couldn't he have been there all those years ago?

Why did I have to wait so long before having this man in my life? When my tears have finally slowed and my breathing steadies, I look up at him, “

Thank you.” I profess hoarsely. “I don't know how you did it, but thank you.”

His thumbs brush my tears away, and he nuzzles my nose with his own before pressing a tender kiss to my lips. There's comfort in his touch, but also despair, and when we part I see tears in his eyes. “Don't ever hide something like this from me again, Ella.” It's not a scolding, or even an admonishment, the words are full of worry and sadness.

“I'm sorry, I should have told you sooner.” I confess, leaning my wet face into the curve of his neck while he caresses my belly. “If I'd known... I never imagined you'd be able to fix it, I thought it would only make things harder for you.”

“I'm not just here to fix problems, mate.” He purrs.

And if they're harder for you, they're harder for me.

Haven't you been telling me I don't get to share the good and keep the bad all for myself? That goes both ways.”

“I'm sorry.” I say again, feeling chastised even though there was no bite in his words. “I know we talked about this... I think I'm still just having a hard time with it.”

“These things don't go away overnight just because we talked about them. They take work – time and effort for both of us.” He pauses, searching my features in a way that makes me squirm. “But Ella, what was that dream?”

I shudder, not able to look him in the eye. “It wasn't a dream, it was a memory.”

Chapter 195 – Ella Comes Clean

Ella

“What do you mean, it was a memory?” Sinclair asks carefully. “I thought the priests came to you in the orphanage? I don’t remember anything about humans attacking you in the woods.”

I stare at my lap, cradling my belly and trying to figure out how to explain my deceit. I knew this conversation was inevitable -I even prepared for it, but these are not the circumstances I expected. I didn’t imagine I would be so emotionally fragile, or that Sinclair would be wrapped around me purring, fresh off of rescuing me from a traumatic nightmare. I thought I would be able to present my case and apologize, acknowledging my wrong doing with confidence and strength of conviction.

Now I fear it’s going to tumble out as a mess of excuses and tangled feelings.

“Ella?” Sinclair presses, his voice taking on a dominant tone.

When I finally look up at him, tears pour from my lashes. “I’ve still been doing the hypnosis.” I confess, my lips quivering with every word. “I went behind your back and convinced the others to help me.”

Sinclair’s glowing emerald eyes bore into me as me.”

Sinclair’s glowing emerald eyes bore into me as his jaw clenches tight, the muscles twitching dangerously. I open my mind to him, showing him everything that happened through our bond, both the lead up to the second session and the events we uncovered through the ether. I even show him the conversation afterwards, not wanting to hold anything back now that the game is up.

Slowly, carefully, Sinclair sets my body away from his, even as I try to cling to him. “No, please don’t leave, Dominic.”

“I’m not leaving.” He assures me gruffly. “I just need to think a minute and I can’t do that clearly when you’re snuggled up giving me those puppy dog eyes.”

I snuffle, and I can feel his wolf’s continued agitation over me tears, even as the possessive Alpha struggles with his temper. I wrap my arms around my knees, clamping my hand over my wrist in a death grip so I stay still. I’m finding it very difficult not to squirm in the face of my mate’s disapproval.

Sinclair paces back and forth, growling wordlessly as he works through his thoughts. He doesn’t let me feel his emotions, but a few slip out, giving me flashes of anger, frustration and... heart wrenching disappointment. I’m shocked at how powerfully the last

affects me. I've heard people who grew up in happy families say that disappointment can be worse than anger, something I've never understood until this moment. I didn't believe anything could be more horrible than the violence and pain wrought by a person's rage, I didn't realize how different things are when love is involved.. when a person is your entire world and you let them down. I start to cry again, and hide my face in my knees so he can't see my tears.

After a moment his footsteps fall silent, and I lift my face to find my mate looming above me, a cold expression on his face. "What am I supposed to say to this Ella?"

"Whatever you like." I croak. "Whatever you're thinking, whatever you're feeling. I know I was wrong."

"Do you?" He counters roughly. "Because it seemed to me you were so convinced you were right you were willing to betray my trust. To ask my family, friends and guards to do the same."

"Not wrong for doing it, wrong for lying about it, hiding it." I amend softly. Let me out. My wolf begs.

I need to make it up to him. Let me show him how sorry I am.

Not yet. I caution her. We need to have this out first.

"What did you think would happen?" Sinclair asks, crossing his arms over his chest. "That you'd uncover the secret to Winning the war and that would excuse what you did? That you could come to me when I got home, tell me everything you learned and be forgiven?"

I shake my head, absolutely miserable. "I just needed to know. We needed to know. But I don't believe it excuses anything."

"You didn't even give me a chance to agree."

Sinclair bites, and even though he's furious, he doesn't seem to be able to resist touching me. He slides his powerful hand around my nape, applying gentle pressure that somehow steadies and thrills me.

"I did," I insist, licking my lips. "I tried to talk to you but you wouldn't listen."

"You didn't," he corrects firmly, stroking the side of my neck with his thumb – pure dominant affection. "Not the way you talked to the others, you assumed I couldn't be objective about you."

A flash of defiance sparks in my chest, and I notch my chin up, trying to match his scowl. "Was I wrong?"

I can feel his wolf fighting for control, and in the next moment he's pulling me up onto my knees.

No, damn you. You weren't." He rumbles, dragging me into his arms and claiming my mouth in a searing kiss. I don't resist, I throw my arms around his neck and let myself be taken. His hands are rough on my body, and so are his lips. Sinclair nips my lower lip with his fangs and takes advantage of my gasp, sliding his tongue into my mouth. His big hand stays locked on my nape, holding me in place for his conquest, tilting my head this way and that. He grumbles and growls, and I shudder in reply, not caring what else happens, as long as he keeps kissing me this way.

Before long I'm breathless and overwhelmed with liquid heat. When Sinclair pulls back, I try to follow him and whimper in disappointment when he doesn't let me. "I won't lie to you, mate." He remarks huskily, our breath mingling. "This has hurt us. How am I supposed to trust you again?"

I shrug, even though this devastates me. "Isn't that the choice you made when you left? To have me safe and hating you, rather than happy and dead?"

I inquire. "I chose to lose your trust and help the war, rather than keep it and hinder our efforts."

Sinclair sighs, stroking my spine in long, soothing lines. "Hugo was right." He says, baffling me.

We're two sides of the same coin, you and I."

"Of course we are." I answer, nudging his nose with my own. "we're mates. If I have to deal with you being stubborn and impossible and infuriatingly self-sacrificing, it's only fitting that you have to deal with the same from me. I'm your just desserts, Alpha."

The corner of Sinclair's mouth quirks upward. "Are you calling me names little wolf? Don't you think you're in enough trouble as it is?"

"I figure that if I'm going to do a thing, I might as well go all in." I reply, offering him a shy smile.

Though I do have plenty of other names in mind for you."

"Mhmm, and what are those?" He inquires, sliding his hand over my bottom and squeezing. It's both sensual promise and threat, but all that matters is the hungry look in

his eyes, all signs of anger and distress replaced with desire.

“Bossy,” I begin, pausing to nibble his jaw.

Overprotective, possessive, tyrannical, bloodthirsty, unreasonable...” I kiss or nip a new spot with every word, moving down his neck and over his chest, delighting in the warning sounds from his wolf. Just when I sense he’s about to pounce, I look up at him and let all my love rush through our bond. “Brave,” I offer, kissing his muscular abs, “Noble..” kiss, “cunning,” nip, “powerful...” lick, “passionate,” I unbutton his sleek black trousers. “Gorgeous, sexy, generous to a fault.” I slide his pants down his legs. “My absolute heart and soul. The best man I’ve ever known. The only one I ever want.”

Sinclair catches my hands before I can take his hardness in my palm, pulling me back up to eye level. He kisses me again, and my pulse races with excitement – every bit as feverish and exhilarating as the first time. “Thank you, baby.”

I’m surprised to hear his deep voice hoarse with emotion, and I realize how hard this distance has been on him as well.

“Has it been horrible, waiting for me every night and me never coming?” I ask anxiously.

“I don’t want to talk about that right now.” Sinclair informs me, with pure authority. “As far as I’m concerned we can deal with all that when I’m back.

But right now I just want to be with my mate.” He brushes my hair back from my face with both hands, cupping my cheeks. “Are you recovered enough, from your nightmare?”

I nod, reaching again for the hard member pressing into my tummy. He stops me again of course, giving me a sharp look. I huff “Yes, Dominic. You made it all okay – you always do.”

“Good, because I have some words for you too, trouble.” Sinclair informs me darkly, laying me out on the bed in front of him. He’s got that wolfish look in his eye, the one that tells me I’m in for a long night at my mate’s mercy. The one that tells me he’s barely in control, and all I can do is hold on and try to survive the pleasure. “Let’s start with brilliant..” he strips off my nightdress. “Beautiful...”

He traces the line of my curves. “Courageous...” kiss, “sweet,” nibble, “fucking delectable,” lick, “... and very, very naughty.”

Chapter 196 – Sinclair’s Blessing

Ella

When I wake up the next morning, I feel better rested than I have in weeks. For the first time since I started hypnosis, Philippe hasn’t had to charge in during the middle of the night to wake me from my night terrors. Simply being able to connect with my mate did wonders for my state of mind, and even though our lovemaking was reserved for our dreams, my body is sated and satisfied.

Even though I just saw Sinclair, my heart leaps when my phone rings a moment later, and I pull the device from its charger. “Good morning my love.” I greet him, beaming.

“Good morning, gorgeous.” His handsome face fills the screen, still drowsy from sleep. “How are you feeling?”

“A thousand times better.” I admit, because not only did he save me from my nightmares, but the weight of my lies are finally off my shoulders. I run my hand over my belly, checking in with our pup.

Rafe is happy too, he’s been missing you as much as I have”

“I’m glad you’re both feeling better,” He rumbles, “ though I have to tell you, you’re not going to be happy with me in a moment.”

“Why?” I ask nervously, sitting up. A thousand possibilities run through my mind, though I have a sneaking suspicion I know where this is going.

“Because I’ve called a meeting with your co- conspirators.” Sinclair reveals, a note of foreboding in his deep voice.

“But Dominic, it wasn’t their fault.” I object. “I’m the one who convinced them and to be fair, without you here I outrank all of them.. except Gabriel.” I amend. “So they were just following orders.”

Sinclair gives me a sardonic look. “I hate to break it to you trouble, but as incredible and strong as you are, your wolf has only been awake for a month – there are children with more experienced animals. As far as I’m concerned, you don’t outrank anybody yet.”

“Im their Luna.” I counter defiantly, deeply affronted that he’s undervaluing my agency in my own scheme.

“You are, and you and I are going to have our own reckoning when Im home.” He promises ominously, “But for now, we all need to get on the same page.

Muttering mutinously, I slide out of bed. “When is this meeting?” I snap after a moment, deciding not to voice some of the more colorful insults in my mind aloud.

“Half an hour, in Gabriel’s chambers.” Sinclair shares, a familiar glint in his green eyes. “Now, would you like to spend that time grumbling at me, or would like to sneak in some fun before the day gets away from us?”

“That depends.” I huff, thinking that I’d quite like to continue grumbling. “What kind of fun?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking of the show you gave me the other day.” Sinclair shares, sending a crimson blush to my cheeks as I recall pleasuring myself on our last video call. “And how beautifully you lost control, even if you were defying me every step of the way.”

I smother a shiver, “And?” I squeak, already excited and having to clench my thighs together to relieve the ache at their center. My annoyance and trepidation about the meeting is gone, replaced only with erotic interest – which is exactly what the wiley wolf intended.

“And since I’m such a generous mate, I thought I might give you the chance to redeem yourself.”

Sinclair bares his fangs, all predator now. “By doing exactly what I tell you to do, no matter how scandalous it sounds..” His words trail off into a low growl, and I swear my se.x spasms as if it’s already on the verge of climax. “You’ll follow my orders exactly, so that even though it will be your own hands, it will feel like I’m the one playing your sweet body like a fiddle – and I’m going to watch every moment.”

“Okay,” I gulp, trying to get control of my pounding heart.

“Good girl. Now prop the phone on the table by the bed and make sure I can see you.” He instructs, his voice like rough velvet. “Then take off your nightgown, and lie down.”

“And then?” I breathe, already obeying.

“Then wait for my instructions..”

Forty minutes later I careen into Gabriel’s chambers, freshly dressed but still weak kneed from our video call. Sinclair was as good as his word – unsurprisingly – and spent nearly the full half hour before the meeting ordering me to pleasure myself for his enjoyment, and Goddess was it hot! I never thought I would enjoy that sort of thing, but I’m wondering if I don’t have a small exhibitionist streak when it comes to my mate.

I'm sure the wolves in this room can sense my over -excited vital signs, not to mention smell my lingering arousal. Part of me wonders if Sinclair doesn't take some sort of twisted pleasure in showing off his sexual prowess this way, or if perhaps this is just part of my punishment. Either way, I veer into the meeting ten minutes late, and take a seat at the table.

Sinclair's face is already on a large computer screen, and his hawkish eyes follow me the moment I enter the room. They linger on me for a long moment after I sit down, before he turns his attention to my companions. "So, I'll get straight to the point," He begins gruffly. "I know that you've all been helping Ella continue to do hypnosis sessions. I know about the second memory she uncovered, and that she hasn't slept in weeks because of the nightmares."

Henry, Roger, Gabriel and Philippe all exchange wary glances, before turning their attention to me.

I sink down in my chair, feeling like a child sent to the principals office – only there are four principals and they're all lethal predators. "I didn't know about any nightmares." Henry states in concern. Roger and Gabriel murmur in agreement, and Philippe glowers as I confess that only he knew.

"No, only Philippe knew and I swore him to secrecy." Their gazes swing to my guard, full of accusation, so I add, "I didn't give him a choice."

"There's always a choice." Henry says gravely, and guilt fills me as I see the shame in my guard's eyes.

"This isn't about blame." Sinclair interrupts. "Ella and I have talked and well sort matters between us when I come home. I also know it wasn't easy for her to convince you, and I know why you agreed." he reveals, sounding resigned. "Im more concerned with how we move forward."

I look up, not quite believing my ears. It almost sounds as though he's going to let us continue, but that can't be right.. can it?

"I know my mate well enough to realize that once she's set her mind on something there isn't any stopping her – at least not when I'm so far away."

He adds with a note of warning. "So I want to make sure that the future sessions are safe and healthy. I want to know when they're happening and how they go, as well as any new information that's discovered."

"Dominic," Henry sighs, "Im sorry we kept this from you, and though we did feel it was worth the risk, I'm sorry we didn't pick up on how badly it was troubling Ella." He reaches

over and squeezes my hand, looking at me with obvious worry.

“Thank you,” Sinclair nods, and I realize that though he certainly blames me for not speaking up about my bad dreams, he also blames them for not noticing what was obvious to him from thousands of miles away.

“But son, you have enough going on without adding these updates and reports to your plate.

Henry continues. “I can assure you that we’ll keep a sharper eye going forward and relieve some of the other stresses Ella is dealing with. Then we can update you with everything when you’re back.”

Not for the first time, I feel a bit indignant to have all these men talking about me as though I’m not in the room, but I also understand this is part of being a she-wolf. All these bossy Alphas view me as part of their pack, and though the independent woman in me feels offended, the orphan who grew up with no one giving a damn about her feels oddly touched. “No.” Sinclair counters, not willing to budge an inch. “I’m not happy about any of this, so I’ll be damned if I’m going to stay in the dark about it.”

“That’s fair.” Gabriel acknowledges. “And I think I speak for us all when I say that we do regret the subterfuge, and for not taking better care of your Luna.” The others mumble their agreement.

“There’s another thing.” Sinclair continues, “Ella, I expect you to go through Leon’s suggested therapy after your sessions, and I want you all to make sure she does it.”

My jaw drops, “What?”

“You heard me, little mate.” He rumbles. “That point is not up for debate. If you’re going to do this, you’re going to do it safely.”

If I could shoot daggers with my eyes, my mate would certainly be dead. Still, he stares me down and growls until my wolf is trembling and tucking her tail between her legs. “Fine.”

“Good.” Sinclair approves, “Now, I’d like a word with Philippe in private.”

My heart sinks as I look at my guard. “Dominic -“

“No.” Philippe, objects, holding up a hand to stop me. “It’s okay, Ella. I answer to my Alpha, and I knew what I was risking.”

“But -“

“Come on, Ella.” Henry encourages, leading me from the room. Still, I can’t help but look back over my shoulder at my guard. The door closes behind us, and the last thing I see is my mate’s enraged face scowling out of the computer screen.

Chapter 197 – Trust

Ella

I pace back and forth outside Gabriel's chambers, absolutely beside myself over Philippe's fate. I have the worst feeling that Sinclair is going to fire or demote the guard because of my actions, and I'm already preparing a furious speech to deliver to my mate if he does so. I can't hear a single word of their conversation because the King's chambers are soundproofed – a luxury I decide Sinclair and I should definitely invest in when we return home.

The waiting is horrible, but eventually my faithful guard emerges, looking thoroughly dejected. I can't stop myself from racing up to him with man energy. "Did he demote you? Is he still on the call –I'll talk to him-"

"Woah," He catches me by the shoulders. "It's okay, Ella. He didn't demote me, he just did a lot of yelling"

"Im so sorry." I profess wringing my hands.

"Don't be." Philippe says evenly, staring me straight in the eye so I can see the honesty in his expression. "You were right. Being someone's guard is a really intimate relationship. You have to trust me with your very life, with all your secrets

He sighs, shaking his head. "Most people get to choose their guards but you didn't pick me, you didn't even know who I was when Dominic assigned me to you."

"So?" I protest, still feeling indignant on his behalf.

"So it's right that I should have to prove myself to you." He chuckles. "Trust has to be earned."

Philippe pauses, giving me an assessing look. "But I have to tell you that if it had gone on much longer. I don't think I could've kept it up.. part of protecting you means looking out for your health and well-being even when you don't want me to do it. You weren't doing well and I'm glad Dominic got through to you. I don't want to be in that position again."

"I respect that." I reply contritely. "And Ill try to do better." I promise, wondering if my sudden urge to explain myself is actually to help him understand, or to make myself feel better. I have a terrible sense that it's the latter, but I forge ahead anyway as we begin walking down the opulent corridor."

These last few months have gone by in such a whirlwind. My entire life is different now and I'm still struggling to catch up."

"It's so strange to me that I matter to people now..three and a half months ago I was alone in the World. I had my sister and no one else. And now I'm a wolf and I'm going to be a mother, and I have a mate and a pack, and I'm in charge of a world I didn't know existed, and I'm in the middle of a war, and I might even have parents out there somewhere." I know I'm rambling, and Goddess love Philippe for standing beside me and listening without judgment. "I love it, but it's still hard. I'm still suffering major growing pains... maybe most of all when it comes to being part of a pack and not just being a lone wolf anymore." I confess, wincing.

When I look over I find Philippe watching me closely. He leans back on his heels, pursing his lips. "Is that part of why you're so intent on continuing the hypnosis?"

"Which part?" I inquire, not even sure about all the words I just blurted out.

"The fact that your parents might be out there somewhere." Philippe clarifies, "I don't think any of us... I mean we all realized you'd been left with the humans and that the Goddess was involved, but I think maybe we were so distracted by how amazing it all is that we didn't consider what it might mean for a woman who probably spent her entire childhood praying that her parents might turn up one day and tell her it had all been a mistake"

My eyes widen, and suddenly I feel very vulnerable. I wrap my arms around myself. "What orphan doesn't have those fantasies?" I shrug."

Cora and I used to say our parents were spies working together on a top secret project for the government and that they'd had to leave us in the orphanage for our safety. But they left us together so we wouldn't have to be alone." I smile at the bittersweet memory. "But we grew up... and we realized that we just weren't wanted. We weren't any more special than any of the abandoned kids in that horrible place."

Philippe is still watching me, and I realize I haven't answered him. "I think it's part of it." I confess. "I've been saying I have to find out where I came from – which is true. But in my brain finding out where I came from is one in the same as finding out who my parents were and why they left me." I chafe my arms, feeling suddenly cold. "

And maybe that's why I've kept Cora out of it too.. because for the first time since I was eight, I feel like there's hope I might find the answers... and that's not a chance she has."

He nods. "It's funny the things that can motivate us without us even realizing it." He observes.

That's why therapy is so useful."

“Oh come on.” I groan, thinking of my mate’s edict.

“Not you too!”

Phillippe raises his hands in self defense, “hey, I’m just following my orders.”

“Suuurre.” I deride, throwing my arms up. “That’s what they all say.”

Two days later I’m back in the sitting room with Leon, Henry, and my small audience of babysitters.

They’ve all agreed to leave Leon and me in private for the therapy session following today’s ether trip – a fact the therapist was only too smug about- but for now they’ve all piled into the room to show support.

The drug is already taking hold of me, but this time I don’t need any guidance from Leon to travel into the past. As soon as the walls come down in my mind, I’m taken even farther into my memories than I’ve gone before.

I’m six years old, and for the first time ever, I have a visitor.

The headmaster didn’t tell me who the strange lady is, or why she’s here so late at night, but she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. The strange thing is that I find it hard to take in all of her features at once. I can only focus on one aspect at a time, and when I do I get so lost in the feature that it feels impossible to look away.

She has long gold hair, so starkly metallic and luminous that it looks like strands of pure starlight. Her eyes are wide and dark, and if I look closely enough, I swear there are whole galaxies swirling in her inky irises. Her limbs are long and willowy, and with the way the shadows ebb and sway around her, I can’t be sure where they end.

Her skin is fairer than any I’ve ever seen, and it seems to glow like mother of pearl. She wears a dress of gentle white fabric that reminds me of clouds, and being near her gives me the strangest surge of energy. I’m finding it hard not to bounce off the walls, but I know grown ups get mad when kids get hyper and then bad things happen.

“Did you hear me, Ella?” She asks in a voice that is both musical and soft like a summer breeze.

“Oh.” I peek up at her face, feeling dizzy when all her stunning features combine. “No, sorry. I’s distracted.”

“That’s okay.” She assures me gently, and my tense muscles relax. “I came to tell you a

story.”

“Really?” I ask in awe. The only stories I ever hear are from bigger kids, and they’re usually not nice-“

Is it a nice story?”

“In some ways.” She answers, tilting her head. “In some others it’s sad, but it’s a story you need to hear all the same.”

“Why?” I inquire, in the way of all curious children.

“Because one day you’ll need to remember it, so you can find your way back home.” She informs me, with more patience than I’ve ever seen in a grown up.

“Okay” I consent, not really sure what’s coming.

“Would you like to sit in my lap?” She offers, “I think maybe you find it hard to look at me.”

I nod shyly, though less because I want to stop enjoying her beauty, than because I want to experience what it’s like to be held – just once. I’m not really sure how to go about it, but she plucks me up into her arms and settles me in her lap. Her body is warm and cool at once, reminding me of a light in the darkness. no, not just any light but moonlight.

Chapter 198 – The Goddess’s Tale

Ella

“Before the world existed, before there were planets or stars or even dust, there was only darkness, The darkness was ruled by a god of creation, an all-powerful celestial being the universe dreamed up to rule the heavens. He existed in quiet solitude for millennia, exploring the farthest reaches of his domain, never tiring, never asking for more.” The strange woman began.

“But didn’t he want things, like friends? Or a puppy?” I ask excitedly, feeling uncommonly bold.

I’m leaning back against my visitor’s chest, running my small hands through her shiny hair and wondering at the way it makes my fingers glow and zing with electricity.

“Well that’s a good question. If you didn’t know that friends or puppies existed, would you long for them?” She asks, not the least bit bothered by my interruption.

I scrunch my face up in confusion, trying to work out this puzzle. “I guess not. You can’t want something if you don’t know that it exists. But I think I’d feel lonely”

“And so did he. she confirms, “though he didn’t realize it at the time. But the universe knew, it had willed this God into being so that he might create but he wasn’t creating anything at all He needed a partner inspiration. So the universe dreamed up another magic, one that would be the perfect balance to his own powers, and one that would need someone to watch over it too”

“What was it?” I ask eagerly

“Can you guess?” The woman asks, “What is the opposite of darkness”

“Light!” I exclaim, with barely a thought. I’ve moved past her hair to toy with the fabric of her dress, but my hands seem to move right through it like fog.

“Very good.” She praises, filling me with warmth.

So one daylight appeared, and it shattered the God’s endless darkness. He didn’t know what was happening, only that everything was suddenly different... more magical. He went searching, and he came upon a goddess of light. When he saw her, he realized what he’d been missing for so long, and he instantly fell in love.” Emotion is heavy in her voice, though I don’t understand why. “She loved him too, and together they created entire worlds: galaxies full to bursting with life, every one different and special in its own way.”

“Galaxies like in space?” I inquire, wanting to make sure I’ve got the information right.

“Galaxies like in space.” She confirms, “like this planet we’re on right now, it’s part of a galaxy, and it was one of their creations one of their favorites. Because you see, creating worlds takes practice. Each had its own magic, but some were more special than others. And on this one they learned to create animals and people and even a few beings in between. Now, these gods never asked to be worshiped, but their Creations could feel their magic coursing through their veins, and so they gave them names.”

“I like naming things.” I offer, running my fingers over her glimmering skin.

“So do I.” The woman expresses fondly. “The humans called the gods of creations by many different names, but wolves, they had sharper senses. They could feel the source of magic in the world, and so they named the Goddess of light after their moon.”

“What about the dark god?” I ask curiously, pausing in my explorations to look up at her glorious face.

“Well you see, that’s the trouble... they couldn’t feel his power as strongly. They thought the darkness was a curse broken by the light, when really they were two halves of the same whole. So the wolves didn’t give him a name, they forgot to worship him. Instead they feared and reviled him. Over time he became jealous of the one they called the Moon Goddess. He began to punish their creations, to haunt and torment them, to make them frightened and do things they shouldn’t.” She explains sorrowfully.

“That’s naughty.” I decide, not liking the sounds of this at all.

“It is.” She agrees, “and the more time that passed, the worse things became. Eventually the humans did find a name for him, but it was no relief, for they called him a devil. It wasn’t fair. He’d given everything to their creations, and they despised him. So his heart grew shriveled and cold, until the only thing he had left was his other half, but he sensed her slipping away too. You see, after so long being alone, he’d finally felt the joy of love, of sharing his immortal life with another. But she didn’t like what he was doing, and the more their creations called on her, the lonelier he felt. He began to fear that eventually she might forget him in favor of her worshippers

“It wasn’ her fault she was busy.” I defend, “I don’ think she woulda forgotten.”

“She wouldn’t.” The woman responds decisively. “

Not ever. But the damage was done. Fear and loneliness are powerful forces, and one day he decided it would be better to destroy their greatest creation. I do not know if he meant it as a punishment or a test, or a desperate plea, but he put the events in motion to make it happen.”

“How?” I question, deeply upset by the thought of losing this story world.

“Well, these Gods decided not to interfere directly with their creations – so that they’d be free. At most they could send messages and signs, try to steer their beings in one direction or another.

And for centuries he’d been spreading discord between the humans and shifters, instilling them with so much of his own fear and anger, that he made it impossible for them to live side by side. It wasn’t always this way, you see. Once they lived in harmony, but before long the wolves went into hiding, building secret societies alongside the human ones. Still the god of darkness continued to sew rage and despair, such that it became clear that if the humans were to find out about the wolves, such a terrible war would be unleashed, that they would all perish.”

“That’s terrible.” I object. “I don’t think I like this story.”

“Just hang in there little one, there’s hope.” She encourages, petting my hair and making me sigh with delight. “Because the light Goddess saw what he was up to, and she knew she had to act. She knew that she needed help, a source of her own magic on earth, someone who could bring together the humans and wolves, a bridge to connect them in harmony.”

“Who’s that?” I question in wonder.

“Well, it had to be someone very strong, someone who could survive a lot of very hard things in order to become the person they needed to be.”

She shares, sounding almost sad now. “And one day not so long ago, there was a King from a very long and powerful wolf bloodline, but he was struggling to make an heir with his queen. He wanted to continue his royal line, but she just wanted a child to love. She had a heart even more powerful than his magic, and one night she prayed to the Moon Goddess to grant her a babe. And can you imagine her surprise when the Goddess appeared herself?”

“That would be... a lot.” I assess, nodding.

“She was shocked.” The woman laughs. “But she bowed down and offered her tributes and blessings, and only then did she make her request.

At first, when the Goddess told her she would have a child – a daughter- she broke down into joyous tears. But as hard as it was, the Goddess had to tell her the truth, that the child would not be entirely hers. It would share the courageous blood of her husband the king, the loving heart of her mother, and the celestial power of the Goddess herself.

Worst yet, she would have to give her up.”

“But why?” I demand, feeling strangely near tears. “I -if she wanted her, then why she have to give her up?”

“Because to unite humans and wolves this child had to be part of both worlds. She had to grown up knowing what it meant to be a human. To feel powerless and afraid, and like there wasn’t magic in the world. But she also had to find her own magic when the time was right so she could be accepted by the wolves.”

But she should be with her Mommy and Daddy.” I say again, my own longing for parents outraging me for this imaginary child.

“She should.” The woman agrees, “if she were not so important, she should have grown up with all three of her parents. King, she-wolf, and Goddess.

But she was. She was important, and so sacrifices had to be made.”

“I thought you said this was a nice story.” I sniffle, outraged.

“I said there was hope.” She corrects me. “And there is. That hope is you Ella.”

“Me?” I hiccup.

“Yes, little one,” She confirms. “Because one day, you’ll grow up, and you’ll fall in love and have a baby of your own. And you’ll remember this. You’ll remember that you have parents who love you and wanted you, and that everything you’ve been through had a purpose.”

“I won’t member it now? Tomorrow?” I ask. “I wanna tell Cora.”

“You won’t, dearheart.” She sighs. “But one day.”

“When” I inquire grumpily.

“When the time is right.”

Chapter 199 – Family

Ella

There are tears in my eyes as I come out of the memory, the heady drug still swirling through my senses. I forget that I'm not alone in the room, trying to wrap my brain around the conversation I just recalled. My mind feels as though it might splinter with the weight of so many astounding revelations.

I met the Goddess, and though I'd been too young to understand the things she explained to me, to realize that I was the child in the story, I'm certainly old enough now. I have a family. I think dazedly, the Goddess's own power runs through my veins. When the heavy silence breaks, I remember I have an audience. "Holy sh!t." Gabriel utters in amazement.

"Did that... was that..." Roger stammers, looking around at the other men. "I can't believe it." Henry concludes, looking solemn but reverent as he strokes my brow.

Was that – was that real, or a dream?" I ask nervously, turning wide eyes to my father in law. It felt real, but years of disappointed hopes have trained me never to trust such things.

"No Ella," Leon answers stiffly, as if he's suddenly not sure how to address me. "That was very real."

I clench my eyes shut, and rivulets of salt water streak down my cheeks. They wanted me" I murmur in awe. My parents wanted me.

"Of course they did. Henry clucked fondly, wiping a few of my tears away. How could they not? My brother-in-law is watching us as if we're mad, Um...is that all that stuck out to you because-

Put a sock in it, Roger." Gabriel cuts him off with a low growl. "Sorry, it just seems like she's burying the lead" Roger answers sullenly, crossing his arms over his chest, "Mean we just found out secrets about the whole damned universe and -"

And Ella just found out that she wasn't willfully abandoned by her parents," Leon cuts him off this time "Let her have this moment before we start digging into the rest." You all are being very calm about this" Roger observes grumpily. "But I'm the crazy, insensitive one,"

Henry turns to glare at his eldest son, "Why don't you make yourself useful and call your brother." Glaring, Roger does as he's told, and a minute later a tablet is pressed into my hand. Dominie's handsome face fills the screen, and I'm introduced to the joys of seeing my mate while in the clutches of the ether. "Hello trouble," He greets me with a wide,

though concerned smile, “How are you feeling?”

I met the Goddess.” I report dreamily, raking my gaze over the rugged planes of his cheekbones and jaw. They’re even sharper under the effects of the drug, and his emerald eyes even more striking. “

You’re so beautiful I want to lick your face.” Sinclair chuckles, the worry lines in his brow smoothing out. “Well right back at you.” He replies warmly, “what’s this about the Goddess?”

“Oh, she was prettier than you.” I admit reluctantly, recalling the enchanting woman with her starlight hair and cosmic eyes. But not nearly as cuddly... I mean her cuddles were nice but yours are so much better.” I stop for a moment, distracted by thoughts of being in my mate’s arms. It takes a moment for my thoughts to get back on track. “But you wolves have had it wrrroonngg. I sing, dragging out the word. “She’s not even the Goddess of the moon, but of all light – and she has a partner.

Though honestly he sounds like a bit of a downer. Well, isn’t that fascinating?” Sinclair tells me, in the tone of one speaking to a drunk toddler. Then he clears his throat, “Dad?”

“Yeah, she’s still pretty high.” Henry mutters, and I emit an affronted scoff. “Here dearheart, listen to this while I explain to Dominic.” My phone is ready and waiting at my side, with the recording of Sinclair’s purrs cued up in case I needed to be calmed down during the session. He presses play, and the sound rumbles to life by my ear, sending ripples of cozy warmth through my body.

In the distance I can hear Henry recounting the entire tale to Sinclair, but I find myself dozing nearer and nearer to sleep, floating on the waves of the drug and my mate’s purrs. I hear the far- away sounds of their astounded discussion, about the God of darkness, the unknown history when wolves and humans openly lived together, and my role in this war. There are too many details to focus on all at once, and the conversation flits around erratically. I can only sigh and snuggle deeper into the sofa cushions.

«Can I have a blanket?” I ask after a while, my words soft and slurred. “And maybe a cupcake?”

A warm, heavy weight settles over my shoulders, and I burrow into the coverlet, You can have as many cupcakes as you want when you wake up, angel.” Henry promises, even though I can hear Sinclair complaining in the background about such an unhealthy prospect.

“Stop being bossy.” I tell him, interrupted by a wide yawn. “Sugar comes from plants... that makes it salad.” Sinclair laughs, and I realize they’ve brought the tablet back over to me. “Stop sassing me and go to sleep, little mate.”

You can't make me... " I mumble weakly, but I'm only met with purrs from both the recording and the video call now. At some point I hear Leon protest. "What about the therapy?" "Let her rest." Sinclair's deep voice instructs, "I go after her, and when she wakes she'll come see

The next thing I know, I'm in the dream forest, and Sinclair is walking towards me through the trees. It's the first time I've been able to find my way here on my own since I started digging into my past, and I run into my mate's open arms. "I did it!

No nightmares!" I exclaim, Wrapping my arms and legs around him. "I see!" He exclaims, hugging me close and dropping kisses over my cheek, temple and hair. I'm so glad, baby."

"Are you sleeping in the middle of the day?" I ask, nuzzling my nose against the bare skin of his chest, that special spot where his scent is the strongest.

I am." He confirms, running his big hands over my body. "I figured it was worth making an exception today."

You should do this every day." I suggest eagerly, nibbling his shoulder and dipping my tongue into his clavicle. "In fact, if we both slept all the time, then we could just be together here the whole time until you come home!"

That might cause a few problems with the summit." Sinclair remarks wryly, reclining on the bed and adjusting my legs so that I'm comfortably straddling him. You know, for someone that was so exhausted a second ago, you're awfully hyper now.

"Because I'm excited!" I announce, sitting up. He reaches for my hands and I thread my slender fingers through his, playfully pushing against his palms and grinning widely. I don't know how much of my euphoric mood is the drugs or the secrets I just learned, but I want nothing more than to be lighthearted and silly right now. "I have a family... one who loved me. I've been dreaming about this since I was a pup."

"I'm so happy for you, sweetheart." I lean down to kiss him, and Sinclair catches me tight, content to explore my mouth with his talented tongue and lavish affection on my body with his expert fingers.

Just before our lips connect, however, I sense him thrusting some unpleasant emotion away, as if putting it aside until later. I only let him indulge me for a moment before I pull back "What is it?"

Nothing." He lies, "Just let me love on you for a while." He catches my lips in another delicious kiss, and my hips reflexively rock against his hardness, but I wriggle free of his

intoxicating trap. No." I insist stubbornly. "Tell me."

He grumbles, moving his mouth to his mark and nibbling the sensitive spot. "Don't you want to enjoy this for a while? Come on, let's leave reality for after the drugs wear off."

"If you don't tell me now I'm just going to build it up even worse in my mind." I declare fiercely. Sinclair sighs and drops his head back against the mattress. "Alright, I need to tell you something about your family.

I freeze, my instincts going on high alert. "Do you know who they are? My parents?" I ask, not knowing how such a thing would be possible based on the limited information the Goddess shared.

"Baby, the couple the Goddess described in your a powerful Alpha King from an ancient bloodline, with a tender-hearted wife who couldn't bear children... around the time you were born... there's only one couple in the world who fits that description." Sinclair explains gently. My heart ceases beating completely, Who?"

Chapter 200 – Revelations

Ella

I'm staring at Sinclair in utter shock, wishing I could unhear the words that just came out of his mouth. You're saying that my father is King Xavier?" I gape, all the joy from the last hour slipping away.

The King who died without an heir and led to your father's campaign against Damon's? The one who killed your mother?"

(We don't know for sure that he killed my mother." Sinclair soothes, "And even if he did, it's not as though that changes anything."

"It means that my father is a murderer – a dead murderer!" I cry, feeling my stomach rise into my throat. It means he ruled over the city where I grew up in terrible conditions and never... never did anything to make sure I was alright."

It hadn't even occurred to me that the Goddess's tale essentially made me a Princess. I'd latched onto the fact that my parents wanted me and glossed over everything else she said- like the fact that my father was a King and that I was chosen to unite humans and wolves. Now that I remember it feels like the entire world is crashing down around me. Baby, we don't have all the answers yet."

Sinclair quickly gathers me back into his arms, sensing my quickly fraying nerves. "This was only your third session and for all we know, your parents never knew where you ended up. Servants of the goddess might have taken you and given you to the orphanage, just like they handled binding your wolf and... whatever the incident in the forest was about."

But he's dead." I repeat, hating that this fact bothers me more than the rest. "I always thought that if I found my parents I'd get to meet them... and now I never can."

"Xavier is dead." Sinclair confirms, turning my face up to his. "But your mother lives, Ella. Queen Reina left Moon Valley after Xavier died and the last I heard, she dedicated herself to the Goddess. When this is all over we can find her."

"Reina?" I murmur realizing I'd never heard the Queen addressed by her name. That's the surname they assigned me at the orphanage. I always went by Ella Reina. " "Maybe that was her gift to you... a clue to find her when the time came." Sinclair suggests.

"And the Goddess?" I ask, feeling suddenly so overwhelmed with emotion that everything seems numb, too convoluted to identify any single feeling from the tangled mass. "She called herself one of my parents too... and she knew all of it, she sent those wolves to bind me, like you said."

She also said it all happened for a reason.” Sinclair reminds me tenderly. “I know it feels like no reason could ever be worth such terrible trauma, but she must have thought it was necessary. I can’t believe she would have done it otherwise.”

“So you’re taking her side?” I sniffle, burying my face in his neck. Never.” He retorts, stroking my spine. “From now until eternity, your side is the only one I will ever take... and if I ever come face to face with that b!tch I’ll punch her right in her beautiful face. We’ll just see how long she stays prettier than me once I get my hands on her.”

I hiccup a laugh, sliding my arms around his neck. Thank you.” I whisper, tilting my face up for a kiss. He doesn’t disappoint me, and we sink down onto the bed together, determined to make the most of the time we have left in the dream.

3rd Person

Roger was lying in his suite, trying to wrap his brain around the day’s events when a knock sounded at his door. He rose and crossed the room, his nose picking up on his new favorite scent, though he could scarcely believe it was real.

But sure enough, when the door swung open, Cora leaned in the doorway, her dark eyes wide and vulnerable. “You still wanna have that drink?”

“Of course,” He ushered her in and took her order, preparing the requested cocktail without a word – waiting for her to take the lead.

“Don’t turn this into something it’s not,” Cora warned as he handed her the glass. “I’ve just had a really long day and I just need to decompress a bit.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Roger inquired, certain she would turn down the offer. But she surprised him again, “I think I might be a terrible person.” She admitted dolefully. “Why do you say that?” Roger asked, fixing his own drink.

“Ella thinks if she doesn’t tell me about all the secrets she’s uncovering, then I won’t find out... she doesn’t seem realize that she’s a celebrity here.”

Cora shook her head. “It’s all over the palace already, the long lost daughter of King Xavier, of the Goddess herself- however that works.”

“Okay?” Roger asked, knowing better than to guess what was bothering her. “The point is that if anyone deserves to be happy... it’s my sister.” Cora groused, trailing off. “But.?” Roger prompted.

“But we were always each other’s only family.” Cora shared bleakly. “Sure, when we

were little, we hoped and prayed that our parents would come for us... that's a hope that never really goes away. But the older we got, we were bonded by the fact that we never knew where we came from and never would.

We chose each other to be our family. And now she might find her real one and I.. I'm angry at her. I'm angry that she's getting answers that I never will. "Are you afraid that she won't need you anymore if she finds them?" Roger inquired gently. "Because that's not going to happen."

I wish it were that – that would be easier than the truth." Cora confessed miserably. "Fear is forgivable. Jealousy is just selfish and petty... But I am jealous. It feels like this is just another way that the world revolves around Ella. It was hard enough when she was just my brilliant, beautiful little sister. No matter what happened to her, she never fell apart, and even though she was good at everything, she was never prideful about it."

"I became a doctor, thinking a prestigious job might even be the playing field... but she could have been one too, she just didn't want to. She only ever wanted to teach children and have a family. Then I got the job at the sperm bank and learned this huge secret about the world, I was doing science unlike anything I could have hoped for and I didn't mind keeping the secret about shifters because I felt special for the first time in my life." Cora revealed, her eyes shining. "Then Ella turns out to be a wolf."

And now.. she's an actual princess, a gift from the Goddess. Roger sighed, understanding only too well. "You know, sometimes I find that when I have a horrible, unconscionable thought. Something so terrible that it shames me to my core, that sometimes saying it out loud can help, because then at least I can acknowledge it and let it go."

Cora nodded slowly. "It's wrong and cruel of me to feel this way, after everything she did for me, after everything she's been through. I know that... But," Cora professed, taking a deep breath. Ella shouldn't get to find her family too... I want to win, just once."

Roger watches as she buries her face in her hands. Why can't I figure out how to define myself outside of her? This is my life, not hers, so why does our relationship have so much power over me? Why can't I figure out how to be my own person?

"If anyone understands that, it's me." Roger assured her, resting a gentle hand on her shoulder. Hell, I plotted against my brother with his enemy, I actually helped attack his mate ->>

Wait, what?" Cora interrupted. "Are you talking about Lydia, or Ella?" "Why, Ella. That night behind the club." Roger paled as he realized his mistake, "I thought you knew."

"No." Cora hissed slamming her drink down. "I did not. Explain – right now."

Chapter 201 – A New Dawn

Ella

If I thought the world was going to look different waking up as a princess, I was wrong. Everything is the same, even though I feel like an entirely different person than I was yesterday. I suppose I should be getting used to having my entire identity and sense of self turned upside down and inside out, but it never seems to get any easier.

If anything it just becomes more confusing. I still can't believe that I know who my parents are... that my father likely killed Sinclair's mother... that my own mother is out there somewhere. Frankly I can't even contemplate the Goddess's role in all this, it's difficult enough being a princess without also being some sort of demigod.

Above all else, I can't wait until Sinclair is home next week. Yes, we'll be preoccupied with the summit, but with everything that's happening right now I simply don't feel steady without him. I need my mate, and I know he's just as anxious being away.

He would barely release me from our dream date last night, making me promise to take it easy today and call him if I got overwhelmed. He could clearly sense my reluctance to agree – but can you blame me? I don't want to interrupt my mate while he's making battle alliances just because I feel a bit weepy.

I force myself to get up and out of bed, even though I feel like I could sleep for a year. I'm almost four months along now, and the baby is more active than ever. He's also creating new challenges for my body – like testing the limits of my bladder, stomach and brain.

I move in front of my mirror to marvel at my round belly, running my hands over my stretched skin. I'd been worried that my stretch marks would be gigantic since my body is trying to cram nine months of growth into six, but I see only a few feathers of purple and white around my sides and breasts. It's also difficult to feel self-conscious about them when my mate insists on calling them love marks' and kisses them every chance he gets.

Of course, another challenge is the fact that none of my clothes fit anymore. Luckily Gabriel's tailors have been hard at work designing me a line of maternity dresses and gowns for the summit, but we've still got a week to go before they're ready and I don't want to walk around naked until then. I head for the closet and eye all the pretty outfits I bought when we first arrived here, sighing in resignation as I turn to Sinclair's rack of clothes.

I snag one of his t-shirts, which fits snugly on his powerful build, but hangs around my thighs like a dress, even with my baby bump. I find a pair of very stretchy leggings and don't even bother looking at the mirror before leaving the room. I'm extremely

comfortable, but I haven't dressed this way in public since I was a teenager.

When Philippe sees me he valiantly attempts to mask his expression, so I give him a big grin. "It's your lucky day, Philippe. We get to go shopping!

Won't that be fun?'

His humor evaporates, and I relish the look of a man who would rather go into battle than spend the morning in a dressing room watching women try on clothes. Ha! My wolf thinks victoriously. All these big bad wolves, scared of a little shopping.

Babies. I agree, deciding to seek out Cora. Of course, I haven't moved three feet before I notice that people are staring at me way more than usual – and I don't think it's my casual outfit. Everyone we come across bows their heads and moves out of my way, rather than saying hello or smiling at me like they usually do. I stop dead in my tracks. "Philippe, why is everybody acting strange?" I have a feeling I already know, but I need to hear it just to be sure.

'You're in a royal palace. Even the walls have ears here, and as loyal as the staff are... when it comes to gods and prophecies... nothing stays secret for long.'" He remarks, shrugging in half-hearted apology.

I exhale shakily, So much for the world seeming the same today. My wolf observes.

I can't make myself move, because a new possibility has occurred to me now. "Is it... is it always going to be this way?" I whisper, so only Philippe can hear. "People bowing and scraping wherever I go? Afraid to look me in the eye? Am I never going to have a normal interaction again?'

Philippe steps up beside me, a strong, steady presence. "I think you humans have a saying, you have to teach people how to treat you."

My lip quirks, "thank you for calling me a human." He nods with a soft smile, "the point is that everyone is in shock and doesn't know what to do... as far as we know there's never been anyone like you before. So if you don't want them to bow and scrape, then tell them not to. Tell them you're the same Ella you were yesterday."

"But then, won't they just be obeying me because of who I am?" I inquire hesitantly.

"Maybe at first." He confirms. "But in time they'll get used to it, and when you go home the people there will see how your inner circle treat you and they'll take the cue."

"Okay." I breathe, placing an appreciative hand on his arm. 'Thank you.'" "Of course, your highness." He teases, and I narrow my eyes to slits.

Philippe chuckles and returns to his place behind me as I continue down the halls, telling everyone I see not to fawn or grovel. I want to see the pups. My wolf huffs. They're always too curious to have these silly stuck-up manners.

I like that idea. I confirm, First shopping, then the nursery.

When I reach my sister's rooms, I'm surprised to hear her pacing and grumbling before I can even raise my hand to knock. Once I do the door swings open and Cora's livid face greets me. "Good morning sunshine." I say, unsure why she's so on edge and praying I'm not the reason.

She ushers me inside. "Did you know?" Cora hisses, baffling me completely. "Know what?" I ask, wondering if the rumors have reached her as well. My heart sinks, I'd wanted to break the news to her myself, to let her know that this changes absolutely nothing between us.

"That Roger helped orchestrate the rogue attack the night at the club!" She exclaims, as if the answer is obvious. "He did?" I question, taken aback by this accusation.

"Yes! It was a plot with the prince from the very beginning. They would attack and he'd rescue you to earn Sinclair's trust. He acted like it was common knowledge." Cora grouses, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I didn't know." I confess, "But that was months ago, before he saw reason and came back to our side."

"How can you be sure he did?" Cora lashes out. "If he was willing to do that then how do you know he's not willing to betray you still? Dominic thought he turned him into a double agent but maybe the Prince turned him back – to a triple agent!"

"Cora," I begin gently. "Dominic trusts his brother, and I trust him too. Roger lost his way for a long time, but I genuinely believe he turned over a new leaf. I can guess why my mate didn't tell me this particular detail, but honestly – I can't bring myself to care after everything that has happened."

"How can you say that!" Cora bursts. They might have killed you!"

"Because millions of people are dying because of Damon at this very moment, and I know Roger well enough to understand he would never let a personal feud with his brother overpower his duty to his pack. He wouldn't help Damon do this." I explain. "Besides in the grand scheme of things, that incident was nothing."

"Well, you might not be able to be angry for yourself, but I sure as hell can be!" She

declares fiercely. "I've told the rat that I'm never speaking to him again and if he comes near either of us I'll rip his head off."

"How did you even find out?" I inquire curiously.

Cora sneaks a furtive look in my direction, and I can see guilt written clearly on her face. "I was confiding in him... I heard about your last session." She admits, not quite meeting my gaze. "I know you found your parents and look, I'm not proud of it, but I was really jealous and angry that your dreams are coming true and mine never will." The words come out in a rush, and then her shoulders sag. "I think he was trying to comfort me by telling me he was an even worse person than I am – which sort of worked but it didn't actually fix anything." Her lower lip quivers as she glances over at me again. "I want to be happy for you Ella, I really do... I'm just not there yet."

Before she can blink, I have my sister wrapped in a rib-crushing hug. "Thank you!"

"What are you doing? Didn't you hear what I said?" Cora questions stiffly.

"I did." I confirm, cuddling closer to her. "Everyone has been treating me like some sort of magical china doll and it's driving me fucking crazy." I confess. "I need some normal. I need my sister – more than anyone else – to keep treating me like I'm the same person as before."

"Even if I'm being a horrible, ungrateful brat?" Cora asks against my neck, her arms coming around my back.

"Especially then." I confirm.

She sniffles and squeezes me, "I can do that." Cora agrees, her voice thick with emotion. "Now what the hell are you wearing?"

Chapter 202 – Mother

Ella

After shopping with Cora and napping away the afternoon with the pups in the nursery, I find my way to Henry's rooms. The guards told me he just returned from the refugee camp, but when he opens the door for me he's all smiles. I give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and he welcomes me in. "You wouldn't happen to be in the mood for an afternoon snack, would you?" He inquires knowingly. "Because personally I'm starving."

I'm fairly certain this is a plot to make sure I'm feeding myself well, but my stomach growls loudly as I find a seat on the couch. Still, I try to sound demure as I shrug, "I could eat."

Henry laughs before calling down to the kitchens and ordering a small feast. As we eat he tells me all about his day at the refugee camp and I, in turn, share my frustration with my sudden celebrity and Cora's news about Roger. He can only shake his head. "That boy has made some bad choices in his life, but I've been very proud of him these last few months. I never thought I'd see the day that my sons would repair their relationship. You know that's down to you, don't you?" He asks warmly, an affectionate twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, don't say that. I'm so tired of getting credit for things that just so happened to occur in my general vicinity." I complain, slumping back and rubbing my full belly. "Not that I don't appreciate the compliments... I just... perfection is an impossible thing to live up to... and I am so far from perfect it's laughable. I don't want to end up with a reputation that I'm destined to fall short of – I'm only human after all." A moment after the words leave my mouth, I realize they aren't true. "I mean, not human, but I'm just a person like everyone else."

"No one said you were perfect, Ella." Henry reminds me pointedly. "I said that you brought Dominic and Roger back together – which is true. If you read more into that then I think you're projecting at best, and giving yourself too much credit at worst."

I can't help but laugh. "Fair enough. I suppose no one has said I'm perfect... I just... I can see the hope and the expectation in their eyes. The refugees, the servants, random people on the street... even my guards. Everyone is looking at me as though I'm the solution to this war, the ruined secrecy pact... but I'm the same person I was yesterday. I don't have the answers to these problems." Seeming to sense there's more, Henry stays silent, and I catch a rogue tear slipping from the corner of my eye. "I'm terrified that I'm going to fail them all, Henry."

Henry wheels around the coffee table, which bears the wreckage of our feast, and takes my hand in his. "Dearheart, that is part of being a pack leader. Every Alpha and every Luna has had the same fear, and I know it feels overwhelming, but it's also your

strength. Duty to your people, the desire to do right by them will keep you centered, it's what will guide you forward through the hardest days of your reign. Now, I know the problems you're facing are a lot bigger than what most Lunas have to deal with, but I promise you aren't alone in feeling this way. That's why the responsibility is so grave."

His words ring true, especially as I think about Sinclair. I know my mate struggles with the incredible weight of caring for all those in his territory, of living up to his title and doing his best for his people, but it still feels different to me.

"But most Alpha's and Lunas have some idea what they're doing." I argue weakly. "They know this world, they've learned and prepared their whole lives from watching their predecessors. They know the history, the society and all of it's challenges. I'm not even a decent ambassador to human society because my experiences were pretty damn niche."

Henry smiles tenderly, "I'm going to give you some advice that will help you as both parent and pack leader. There are countless days ahead where you will feel uncertain, where you're overwhelmed and exhausted and all you can do is pray that you're not messing up your child or your people in some irreparable way."

"Is this supposed to be comforting?" I squeak, cradling my belly protectively and wishing I could keep my son in the safe haven of my womb until this wretched war is over.

Henry chuckles good-naturedly. "The advice is just to keep putting one foot in front of the other. If you step back and think about everything at once, the weight will crush you. Just take it one day at a time, and before you know it, you'll realize that you had what it takes all along. It won't be easy – but I promise you, nothing is more rewarding."

"Thank you." I profess tearily, reaching forward to hug him. "That isn't even what I came to talk to you about, but I guess I needed to get it out."

"Exactly." He purrs, patting my back. "Poor little mother, I'm sorry you're dealing with all this alone."

"But I'm not alone." I correct him with a watery smile. "I have a family for the first time in my life – and I don't mean the one who gave me up." I clarify, wiping my eyes. "I'm so grateful to you all. I admit, it's been one hell of a learning curve to figure out how to talk about my feelings, but I have to admit Dominic was right – it helps." I glance at my father-in-law. "Don't tell him I said he was right."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Henry promises, swiping his fingers over his lips and throwing away the key. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Oh." I say, my face falling. I'm half tempted to brush it aside and save this conversation

for another day. We've ended on such a lovely note, and I'm not eager to mess it all up. Still, when I glance up at Henry he's giving me an expectant look like he knows exactly what I'm thinking and won't let me get away with it. Not for the first time, I see where my mate gets his bossiness. Taking a deep breath, I forge ahead. "Dominic told me who my parents are."

Henry nods in understanding, "It must have been quite a shock... Are you disappointed, that you won't be able to meet your father?"

I shake my head fiercely, squeezing his hand as hard as I can. "I already have the only father I need." I proclaim, and suddenly I'm not the only one who has tears in my eyes. "But I'm horrified to think that my – that Xavier might have ripped your family apart." I confess, my tears returning. "That he stole your mate – Dominic and Roger's mother. I don't want to belong to his bloodline."

Henry clucks and brushes my hair back from my face. "None of us can change where we come from, Ella." He states softly. "But your upbringing taught you a lesson most of us don't learn until much later in life: the family you choose can be a thousand times better than the one you were born into. Blood may be thicker than water – but so are a lot of things... mayonnaise, frosting, gravy..."

A giggle breaks through my heavy emotions, and Henry smiles in return. "The point is that your father doesn't have to define who you are – you have more power to decide that than most." He continues, turning my chin up to look into my face. "I knew your parents fairly well, and I can tell you right now that I don't see any of Xavier in you – I never have."

"And my mother?" I inquire shakily, not sure whether I truly want the answer to this question.

"Your mother was one of the kindest women I've ever met." Henry shares. "She was unlucky in her fated mate, but like you, she loved her pack, and she dreamed of children. It can't have been easy for her to give you up."

"Do you think he knew – Xavier, I mean?" I ask. "The Goddess said he wanted an heir... would he have even cared about a girl? Would she have just told him the child died and kept the secret for herself?"

"Xavier was much like Aimon." Henry reveals, referring to Damon's father. "He was a ruthless king, though his bloodline was much older and stronger than the Tyrant's. He was willing to sacrifice a few for what he believed was the good of the pack, but he wasn't without a conscience. He wasn't mad. If he knew the Goddess had ordained it that you be taken into hiding, he never would have disobeyed her. If anything it would have given him great pride to think his child would be so important down the line."

I nod, grappling with so much new information. “Dominic also said... he said my mother is alive.”

“She devoted herself to the Goddess once Xavier died.” Henry confirms, “Which makes a lot of sense now that we know about you. I’m not sure where she went. But the Goddess’s temples tend to be in very remote, sacred places.”

“Do I look like her?” I inquire, feeling strangely vulnerable now.

Henry purses his lips. “I have a feeling that the parent you take after most is the one you’ve already met.”

It takes me a moment to realize he’s referring to the Goddess, and I have to blink a few times, trying to recall the memory. I want to say I disagree – after all, my hair isn’t made of starlight and my eyes are not the endless cosmos. But the more I think about it, the more I can see similarities – albeit very dulled and downplayed ones. My pearly white skin, eyes and hair in shades of gold I’ve never seen on another person, my light, willowy limbs...

Still, the Goddess wasn’t the one who wanted me. She might have needed me, in the same way Xavier needed a son to carry his legacy. But my mother, the one who carried and birthed me... she’s the one who wanted me.

“I want to find her.” I tell Henry suddenly. “Do you think we can track down the temple where my mother became a devotee?”

His warm gaze observes me with more understanding than I can bear. “We can try. And we’ll keep trying until we succeed.”

Chapter 203 – Damon Plots

3rd Person

When James started transporting refugees from the embattled continent to the hidden territories, his job had seemed simple – dangerous, but simple. He would land his plane on the coast and hide it as best he could, taxiing into the forest and covering the aircraft with tarps and plantlife.

He would then travel inland on foot. It was twenty miles to the nearest village, so James would often trek through the night until he came to the modest inn where Sinclair's network of spies were ferrying hunted shifters to safety. Once they were handed over into James's care, the spies would disappear back whence they came, and James would lead his new charges to the coast.

On a few occasions things had gotten dicey, like with Sadie's parents. They had unknowingly been followed by Damon's agents, forcing the entire group to scatter while James and some of the abler men stayed to fight. When Sadie's father fell, her mother hadn't been able to stay away, and the decision cost her life.

Thankfully that sort of drama was a rarity, though every refugee was consumed by near constant adrenaline on their journey, only able to relax once the plane landed in the hidden territories. At least, that's the way things started, back when he'd had the time to learn every face and name, hear every harrowing escape story.

Everything changed when the humans learned about shifters. Now the once-empty coast was crowded with bodies as far as the eye could see. There was no longer any need to travel to the village, because the refugees came straight to him.

Landing had become something of a gauntlet, as the terrified people were too busy clambering to the front of the queue to clear an adequate landing strip. James was terrified that he was going to hit someone one of these days.

Even with the extra planes and pilots Gabriel had provided to make these runs, there was never enough space for everyone. At best they could take a hundred people a day, but thousands were gathered – exhausted, starving, and injured.

James was also well aware that the operation was growing too large to stay secret, and he lived in constant fear of the day that Damon would send his army to slaughter the fleeing shifters. The only silver lining– if it could be called such a thing – was that his forces were so busy trying to manage the havoc they'd wreaked across the land, that there weren't any soldiers to spare.

So as he helped the most urgently injured shifters and families with the youngest children board the plane, he was so distracted answering the pleas and cries from those

who wouldn't be able to travel this day, that he didn't notice an extra man sneak onto the plane. He didn't catch the way the shifty character slunk to the very back and huddled on the ground, wrapped in an emergency blanket. James didn't see the dangerous glint in his eye as he surveyed the quaking passengers, and when they eventually landed in the hidden territories, he didn't realize that one of his passengers hadn't thanked him for his rescue.

The man prowled off into the triage tents, his hungry gaze taking in every detail, listening to every word spoken by his relieved companions. When he reached the intake tables, he gave a false name, accepted his tent assignment, and disappeared into the camp— as silent as a ghost.

“They're here.”

Damon – now better known as Emperor Damon (as he insisted everyone call him) or the Usurper (for which he threatened to kill anyone caught calling him) or His Royal Fuckwit (his least favorite name of all) – swore violently, smashing his fist into his desk. “I knew it! That bastard Gabriel must be hiding them.” He complained, speaking so loudly into the phone receiver that the man on the other end of the line flinched. “Have you seen them?”

“No, I'm still in the refugee camp.” His spy replied. “But I have plenty to tell you regardless. This entire place is abuzz with intel, the idealistic fools never saw me coming.”

“Well get on with it then.” Damon ordered gruffly, pacing in his rooms.

“To start, Sinclair is apparently traveling around the Vanaran territories building alliances with the Alphas here, and the rest of his delegation stayed behind. Word is that the old man and Sinclair's Luna visit the camp most days, and the King and that traitor Roger are busy trying to find local families to host the refugees.” The spy reported, derision heavy on his tongue.

“What else?” Damon growled, becoming more and more furious with every moment that passed. “Do you know if the alliances are successful? Are they building an army?”

“I don't know, but there's going to be a huge political summit next week. Every Alpha on the continent is going to gather in the Capital to either pledge or deny their support.” He answered. “They've made it into quite a lavish affair, with excursions, opportunities to hear from the survivors of the conflict, feasts and even a grand ball.”

“Trust Sinclair to wine and dine grown men like one of his fucking girlfriends. Does he

understand nothing about war?" Even as he said it, Damon was grinding his teeth with barely contained worry. If Sinclair succeeded in his efforts, there was no telling the damage he and the Vanarans could inflict. With their next-generation technologies, they could probably wipe out his armies in a single stroke. "I can't believe I didn't think of this sooner. I thought they'd just gone to ground. I should have remembered how far back he and Gabriel go!"

"Well the Vanarans aren't your only problem." His spy remarked reluctantly. "They might not even be your biggest."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Damon hissed.

"By far the biggest rumor swirling around this place is that they've figured out his Luna is the long lost daughter of King Xavier." The spy shared, trying to hide the excitement in his own voice.

"That's nonsense, Xavier and Reina never had children. Everyone knows that." Damon argued, though he rubbed his neck, trying to remember if there had ever been a failed pregnancy or still-birth. "There is no way they could have had a pup without anyone knowing, let alone that the bitch would have ended up in a human orphanage."

"Apparently it was by the Goddess's own orders that she be hidden." The spy explained, relating the events of the hypnosis session, which were now all over the city.

"What absolute nonsense." Damon dismissed the tale before the last words were even out of the man's mouth. "That sounds like the sort of fairy tale a child makes up to comfort themselves. People can't possibly believe that shit."

"But how could a tiny human child know about wolves? How could she know about a King and Queen when she didn't even know monarchies still existed? That anything existed outside of the human world?" The spy questioned.

"I don't know, kids are creative." Damon scoffed, "Last week my son was talking to an imaginary cowboy all day long, the little idiot."

"They're calling her a demi-goddess." The man revealed, "they believe she was sent to save them. She's even more popular than Sinclair."

"Then get rid of her." Damon commanded sharply. "If they lose their hope, they lose their will to fight. Put an end to the bitch before it's too late."

"Do we even know if she can be killed?" The spy asked uncertainly, "if she's truly the go—"

“Everyone and everything can be killed, one way or another.” Damon snapped. “Sinclair isn’t there to protect her and from the sounds of it, she’s running around the refugee camp without a care in the world, so just get it done.”

“I didn’t sign up to assassinate anyone.” The man countered. “This was just supposed to be information gathering.”

“Oh like you haven’t killed for me before.” Damon reminded him. “Don’t tell me you’re balking because she’s breeding.”

“No... but I’m not eager to kill the child of the Goddess.” He corrected.

“You can’t honestly believe that nonsense.” Damon exploded. “She’s not a fucking unicorn, she’s a regular she-wolf with a grandiose personality disorder.”

“I won’t do it.” The spy protested, gritting his teeth. “Even if I wanted to, she’s constantly surrounded by people. I might be able to get to her but it would be the end of me. Can you imagine what they would do to the man who murdered their savior.”

“Fine, if you’re too much of a coward to do what’s necessary, then at least kill Sinclair while he’s away from his reinforcements.” Damon suggested. “If he’s traveling then he’s vulnerable – meeting countless shifters he doesn’t know, moving through unsecured areas with minimum security. There are advanced technologies in Vanara, weapons and tools we don’t have. It could be as simple as planting an explosive on the road to intercept his car.”

“That’s assuming I can get my hands on their weapons and track him down in time, to predict his movements well enough to ensure he fell for the trap.” The spy explained.

“Is that a no?” Damon snarled.

“No,” the spy clarified. “It’s a question of how much you’re willing to pay. If you want me to kill an Alpha, my price just went up.”

Chapter 204 – Boom

Sinclair

“Where are you now?” Ella asks, her beautiful face looking up at me from my phone screen. “We’re headed to the Storm Forest pack, but we’ve got quite a few hours on the road before we get there.” I sigh, wishing we hadn’t needed Gabriel’s planes for the refugees, so that we might have flown these long distances.

“Storm Forest.” Ella murmurs, her eyes lighting up, “Does that mean you’re going to get to see some trees at last?”

Chuckling, I turn my phone towards the window, so she can see the rolling salt flats flying by in the distance. “No, unfortunately they chose their name to honor the ancestral lands they left before coming to the hidden territories. I’m afraid that the only trees here are the ones planted in Gabriel’s gardens.”

Ella’s face falls, and her lips form an adorable pout, just begging to be kissed. “I don’t know how they can stand it.”

“My poor little forest wolf.” I purr in sympathy, “our dream forest isn’t enough, is it?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not the same, just like being with you there isn’t the same as being with you in reality.”

“I know, baby.” I share honestly, “I feel it too.” I don’t add that it drives me crazy; that getting to hold her and love her in that secret place only our wolves can find, is nothing compared to actually having her with me. Every morning I wake up aching for her – in more ways than one.

“How many days?” Ella asks, giving me a sultry look that tells me she knows exactly how badly I’m longing for her. How I wish I wasn’t in the back of a car surrounded by my men, and that she wasn’t currently cuddled up with the pups in the nursery.

We could pull over. My wolf suggests slyly. Sneak off into the distance and have her do the same.

No. I respond, not liking it any more than he does. We need to keep moving, and she needs her rest. “Five.” I eventually answer, resisting the urge to adjust my trousers. “Five more days and we’ll be together again.”

Ella pouts again, and my wolf rumbles in my head, Naughty mate, tempting me this way. Doesn’t she know how delectable she looks? It should be illegal to have such full, luscious lips.

She visibly shivers, and I realize I've growled aloud. Unintentional or not, I don't regret it – I love seeing my sweet mate squirm with anticipation and desire. She drops her gaze in submission, and my growl turns to a pleased purr. "I can't wait to see you."

"Me too." She confirms, flushing. "Though, there is something I need to talk to you about."

"Oh?" I ask, not liking the sudden somber note in her silken voice. "What's that, gorgeous?"

"Well, I was talking to Henry, and he offered to help track down my mother." She confesses, sounding nervous now.

My heart softens, "Of course, we'll all help you sweetheart. As soon as Damon is dealt with, we'll find her."

"No Dominic, that's the problem." Ella admits with a grimace. "I don't think it should wait. I think I need to find her as soon as possible."

I try to keep my face blank as I absorb this information. She hasn't said it, but I understand she's talking about another separation. There's no way I can go searching with her, which means she wants to do it alone. My wolf positively rails against this idea, and I'm not any happier about it. Still, I don't want to shut her down without consideration for her feelings. "Ella, are you sure that this is what we need, and not simply what you want?" I ask. "I understand that you feel compelled to find her, but I have to tell you that I don't like the idea of rushing it this way."

"You mean you don't want to let me run off on my own, even though you just did the same thing in the name of duty." Ella assesses, her golden eyes narrowed.

"I mean you're entering the final stage of your pregnancy and we're at war. If you want me to even consider letting you out of my sight, you need to give me a damned good reason." I reply sternly.

Ella huffs and rolls her eyes, and my responding growl sends shudders through the other men in the car, but not my defiant mate. She simply glowers at me, "Based on my memory, my mother met the Goddess – she spoke with her and was convinced to give me up. I think there's a chance she has information – answers about all this, things that might not exist in my past."

"I'm hearing a lot of maybes and mights, little one." I reply gently, trying to keep in mind that she's been waiting to have a mother for more than thirty years. I hate the idea of keeping Ella from anything she wants, especially this, but I can't abide the thought of her taking even more risks than she already is.

“But maybes and mights that could turn the tide in this war.” Ella argues. “Isn’t that worth finding out, Dominic?”

“And if she’s somewhere you cannot follow? Somewhere so far away that it will take months to find her?” I ask sharply. “How far are you willing to go for answers? Is finding her important enough to risk our pup? To miss the war you were born to fight?”

“That isn’t fair.” Ella answers, her hurt plain in her voice. “I didn’t ask to be born to fight this war. I didn’t ask for any of this – the only thing I did ask for was our baby, I wouldn’t ever do anything to risk him.”

“I know,” I exhale, regretting my words. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have suggested that.” I’m desperate to put a smile back on her face – to ease the pain I can see in her eyes, but which our distance keeps me from feeling through the bond. “You didn’t ask for me either.” I remind her with a smirk. “And look how well we’ve turned out.”

Ella scoffs, but there’s clear mischief in her expression. “Ha – as if I enjoy having a giant, grumpy wolf bossing me around every second of every day.”

I chuckle, “Deny it all you want, trouble, but remember I can hear the way your heart races every time I take you in hand.”

“Ogre.” She accuses, sticking her little pink tongue out at me.

My wolf groans in my head, “That’s a dangerous thing to do sweet mate, you’re lucky we’re not together or I’d teach that precious tongue a lesson.” Hugo clears his throat and shoots me an exasperated look, an important reminder that I’m not alone. Ella hears it too, and my temporary distraction comes to an end. Though she giggles and flushes, she also glances at the pups snuggled around her to make sure they’re still sleeping, and turns the conversation back to tamer territory.

“I wasn’t saying any of this just because I want to meet my mother, Dominic.” She pauses, averting her gaze. “I mean I want to... of course I do... but I can be patient. I’ve waited this long and I can wait longer... but every time I go into a session with Leon I learn something new and overwhelming... I just thought that if there’s someone out there who has all these answers then maybe I wouldn’t have to keep doing this – learning bits and pieces every few days in the most agonizing ways...” Ella peeks back up at me with wide eyes. “Maybe that makes me a coward – wanting the answers without doing the work.”

“You are the farthest thing from a coward I have ever seen.” I inform her seriously. “And I’m not just saying that because I love you or want you to feel better. It’s natural to want to avoid unnecessary pain, and I don’t blame you for feeling this way one bit.”

“But you don’t want me to go.” She assesses, slightly mollified.

“I don’t want any of this.” I confess, hoping she realizes just how deeply I understand and share her own frustration. “If I had my way, you and I would have a little cottage in the mountains where we could raise our children and run in the forest, and never have to think about politics or prophecies.”

“But that will never be our life.” Ella laments huskily, her eyes shining.

“Maybe one day, when this is over and our pups are grown. When Rafe takes the throne and I retire, we can go and find that place. We’ll get old and grey and fat, and all of this will seem like a bad dream.” I suggest.

“Not all bad.” Ella protests, and I can see her arm moving, caressing her belly. “There’s been a lot of good too. It’s just hard to appreciate sometimes when everything else is so terrible. It feels wrong to enjoy what we have when so many other people are losing everything they hold dear.”

“I know.” I agree, “but it’s also why we have to cherish what we have and not take it for granted. This war is a horrible reminder of how quickly it can all end.”

“I won’t ever take you for granted.” Ella promises with a smile, “no matter how bossy you get. You’re my everything, Dominic – I never felt alive until I met you.”

“I won’t take you for granted either.” I vow, and these promises remind me of the mating ceremony we never had. We told the pack we were waiting until after Rafe was born, and by the time we finally confessed the truth and might have considered having one sooner, all hell broke loose. A new idea occurs to me and as soon as I think it, I know it’s right. We should have our mating ceremony before I go into battle, before we can be separated again. “Ella –”

Before I can make my proposal, a deafening explosion detonates all around us, and the world goes black.

Chapter 205 – Panic

Ella

I stare at the black phone screen in shock and confusion, trying not to jump to the wrong conclusion. One moment Sinclair was there, talking to me as if everything was normal, and the next I heard a terrible boom and saw a blinding light. Then the line disconnected. It didn't look or sound like a car crash... it seemed... it seemed like some sort of explosion.

Maybe it was just the call getting interrupted, some sort of weird static... or a sound on the radio. My wolf suggests, even as I frantically attempt to call him back. The line doesn't even ring, I simply hear an error tone and a voice telling me the call can't be completed.

I untangle myself from the sleeping pups, waking a few of them but too alarmed to pause and apologize. My heart stops beating, and my lungs stop pumping. This isn't happening. This can't be happening. It's just a problem with the phone. I think desperately, stumbling out of the blanket fort, gasping for air. Isabel looks over when she hears one of the rudely awoken pups emit a cranky cry, her attention quickly zeroing in on me.

"Ella, what is it?" She asks, looking between me and the pups. "Is it the baby? Are you sick?"

"I ca... I can't breathe." I wheeze, pressing my hands to my breast in a feeble attempt to make my body start working again.

Isabel tries to guide me to a chair but I push her off, gasping. "Get the King." I beg, "Henry... get everyone." The room is spinning before my eyes, and I reach out to the she-wolf to steady myself, certain I'll topple over at any moment. Isabel shouts an order to one of the guards and he takes off at a run.

"You've got to calm down, Ella." Isabel says sternly, pushing me into a chair and forcing my head between my knees. "You're alright, you're just having a panic attack." Though her voice is cold, warm hands rub my back.

I shake my head violently. "No... you don't understand." I hiss, between gulps of air. "It's Dominic... I think... I think something happened."

She goes very still, "what do you feel?"

"Nothing," I reply hurriedly, trying to feel him through our bond even though I know he's too far away to sense. "I mean, not... not different." Tears are spilling from my eyes, and my voice is shaking over every syllable. "We were on the phone and then there was this

huge boom and a flash of light... like an explosion and the call dropped, I can't get him back. It says the line is dead."

Isabel exhales a breath I hadn't realized she was holding. "That could be nothing. And when my mate died, I felt like my soul had been ripped out of my body and torn to pieces."

"Were you together, when it happened?" I ask urgently, "were you chosen or fated?"

"We were together." Isabel admits reluctantly, as if I'm forcing her to remember things she'd rather not. "I saw it happen, and yes, we were fated."

"I'm sorry." I hiccup, "I didn't mean... I'm just trying to figure this out."

"It's okay." Isabel answers, though her shoulders are rigid. "I understand."

A few minutes later Gabriel comes rushing into the nursery, followed closely by Roger. "Ella what's wrong?"

I'm still heaving and gasping, worse now that my tears have taken hold, so Isabel explains for me. Both men immediately tense, their faces growing grave and serious. "I'll call the doctor for something to calm you down." Gabriel says to me, "And I'll deploy a drone to fly over the road they were traveling, reach out to the Storm Forest Alpha to see if there have been reports of crashes or explosions."

"I don't want the doctor." I argue, rising to my feet and wrapping my arms around my middle. "I'm not taking or doing anything until I know whether or not Dominic is alright." The baby flutters and kicks inside me, and I feel a rush of sadness and confusion through our bond. I hate knowing that my emotions are causing him distress, but I also don't know how to help it. I try to send waves of calm back to him, letting him feel my love and commitment to protect him, but it doesn't help much.

In the end I take a step I never have before, and cut him off from my feelings completely. This was never possible when I was in the depths of hypnosis because I wasn't even present myself, and the other times I've shielded him from things, I've had the presence of mind to allow the good things through our bond. But now I'm too out of control to regulate anything, so it will have to be all or nothing.

I regret this as soon as I do it, because the moment Rafe stops sensing me, he panics. Stress and fear unlike anything I've ever felt from him pummels my heart, and I immediately drop the shield I put up. "It's okay," I say aloud, running my hands over my belly – it must have felt like I disappeared completely, and with Sinclair so far away too, he must have thought he was all alone. "I'm here. I'm here, angel. I'm sorry."

The baby calms at once, and I feel the first pulse of anger he's ever directed at me, as if his tiny mind is demanding where I went – how I could leave him like that. "I'm sorry, I love you so much. I'm here" I repeat over and over.

The sensations make the loss of my own parents loom larger in my heart, but when it happened to me I was too young to remember. Still, I must have felt this way... only instead of a terrified flash it was permanent. I'm all too aware that I'm still in the nursery, surrounded by a number of children who were old enough to remember the pain and fear of being suddenly, viciously alone – their souls cut off from the only bonds they'd ever forged. The thought makes my knees go weak.

Gabriel and Roger are still looking at me with obvious concern, and Isabel is wearing an expression that makes me think she understands exactly what just happened. She nods bleakly, and slides a steadying arm around my waist, looking at the men, "If you don't let her come with you, she's only going to be worse."

I could hug her... assuming she would let me, but Gabriel and Roger exchange a wary glance before agreeing. "Fine, but I'm putting the doctor on call, just in case."

"I'll go get Dad." Roger announces, taking off towards the palace entrance.

An hour later I'm doing breathing exercises while we watch one of Gabriel's aerial drones zoom across the foreign landscape. Any other time I would be fascinated to discover the secrets of the hidden territories, but now I can only wring my hands and pray. The search seems to go on forever, and my nerves are fraying more and more with every moment that passes. Finally a few specks appear in the distance, and I recognize the salt flats Sinclair had shown me out the window on his drive. The specks grow larger and larger as the drone flies... and then we see the flames.

The room is deathly silent as the cars come into view... what's left of them at least. Where there were once shiny SUVs, there are now only mangled and charred husks of metal, centered in the middle of a blasted crater of earth. "No." I gasp, counting them, trying to figure out if there was any way the men might have escaped. The drone flies lower, and when I see the burnt outline of an arm hanging out of one of the shattered windows, I clench my eyes shut. I'm rocking back and forth on the sofa, refusing to look at the screen, to witness the horror tearing through the room.

Pounding footsteps charge for the door, and when Roger's scent fades I understand he must have stormed out. I peek at Henry, hoping he'll tell me this isn't real. But when I look... I barely recognize him. His face is grey and pallid, and all the strong steadiness I've come to expect from him is gone. He's sunk in on himself, his expression one of a man whose just had his whole world shattered. I swing my gaze to Gabriel for help, but the King stands in front of the screen with his hands in tight fists and tears in his eyes. They all believe it. They all think he's gone.

"No." I insist, refusing to accept this. "No, he might have escaped somehow. He's not..." I can't bring myself to say the word. It's too terrible to contemplate.

"I'm so sorry, Ella." Gabriel says, in a voice like gravel. "I don't want to believe it either, but I'm afraid he's gone."

"No!" I cry, shaking my head. "Why are you saying that! He can't be gone! Do you have any idea what he's survived? What he's overcome? He's not dead!" I explode, spinning in place, searching for anyone who will agree with me. When I find none, I stop and dig my heels into the ground. "I won't lose him, I can't!"

Before I can say another word, pain rips through my belly, clenching and white hot. My lips part on a silent cry as I double over, clutching my stomach. Black spots take over my vision, and the carpet zooms up to meet my face. Then all is quiet.

Chapter 206 – Denial

Ella

When I wake I'm in my nest, hooked up to about a dozen machines and wracking my brains for some explanation of how I got here. Of course... the moment my memory kicks in, I wish it hadn't. My wolf howls in my head, but I shut out the tumultuous emotions threatening to consume me. It might not be healthy, but if there's one thing I'm good at – it's repressing feelings.

I clench my eyes shut. "It's not real, it's not real." I insist to the empty room, reflexively tracing the outline of my womb. "Are you alright, little one?" I squeak, wondering if my pain is about to multiply by a million.

The baby flutters and sends feelings of sleepy confusion through our bond, and the tightness in my heart eases a bit. He's okay. I tell my whining wolf, but we both know she's not just worried for the baby's sake.

They're both okay. My wolf assures me, sounding surprisingly confident for all her nervous whimpering. I don't care what anyone says. We would feel it if he was gone. I would feel it.

But what if he's too far away? I ask, hating myself for the kernel of doubt currently sitting in my stomach like a boulder.

I would still know. She insists. Trust me, no amount of distance could fool me. Our bond is in tact, just out of reach.

Then why are you so worried, I can feel how feral you are. I remind her, praying she's right and that this isn't simply bravado.

Because he's out there alone somewhere and someone just tried to kill him... they succeeded in killing all his men. She answers, and I can feel the truth in her words.

As if we don't know who's responsible. I growl fiercely. This is Damon's doing. I don't know how he managed it, but I will not rest until that bastard is six feet in the ground. Too late I realized I growled out loud, and a man's voice breaks through our private conversation.

"Oh good, you're up." The palace doctor is standing in the doorway, looking at me with the pitying expression of someone who wants to be sensitive but doesn't know how. "You gave us quite the scare, Ella."

Well at least he didn't call us Your Highness. My wolf remarks dryly, noting the trend that far too many of the Vanarans and refugees have recently adopted.

“What happened?” I ask, my hands still resting on my belly. “Is my pup alright?”

“You had what is called a hypertensive crisis.” He answers evenly. “At times of extreme stress, your blood pressure can skyrocket to very dangerous levels. In your case it triggered false labor and a dizzy spell which thankfully caused you to pass out before your heart or child could be harmed.” He explains. “We’ve got you hooked up to an IV to get some fluids into your system, and it also allows us to administer anxiety medications and sedatives as efficiently as possible.”

“Do I have to go back onto bed rest?” I question worriedly.

“For the time being.” He confirms. “I’m very worried about you, Ella. High blood pressure is very dangerous during pregnancy and you’re under far too much stress. I know the doctors in Moon Valley diagnosed you with preeclampsia, and when you arrived here we thought that the condition had been mitigated by your wolf waking. But based on the numbers I’m seeing, you’re at risk of the condition returning. We need to get your stress levels under control.”

“That’s easier said than done.” I answer sullenly. “We’re at war... and my mate...” I know if I tell him that Sinclair isn’t dead he’ll just think I’m in denial, but I can’t bring myself to lie either.

“I was very sorry to hear about Alpha Dominic.” The doctor tells me sympathetically. “I know it’s hardly a comfort, but his death is a huge loss for all shifter kind.”

I can’t bring myself to thank him, even though I know he’s trying to be nice. I simply nod and glance at the IV. “Do I have a choice about the sedatives?”

He sighs. “You need to rest, Ella. I can’t force you to take anything, but I must encourage you to follow my treatment plan for the sake of your child’s life and your own. Eclampsia kills mothers and babies... even these days with all the technology we possess. It’s not something to mess around with.”

“I understand.” I murmur, feeling fresh tears well. “Would you like to tell me what worries you about the sedatives?” He inquires.

“No.” I answer stiffly, because telling him would mean admitting that I believe my mate is alive... and how terrified I am that he isn’t. The truth is that I’m afraid to go to sleep, because no amount of distance can keep us apart in dreams. My mate can even follow me into my deepest, darkest nightmares... so if I sleep and he isn’t there... it will mean he’s really gone. That possibility is just too horrible to contemplate.

“Then I’ll leave you to rest.” The doctor answers, thankfully not seeming offended by my

response. "But I hope you'll reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns."

I nod and he leaves. I'd just started to burrow deeper into my nest, seeking the lingering scent of my mate from the last time we lay here together, when Henry and Cora enter the room. They both have tears in their eyes, and Cora immediately comes forward and climbs into bed with me. "You scared me." She murmurs, cuddling up to my side. "I'm sorry." I profess, kissing her hair. "I'm okay."

Though I'm speaking to my sister, my eyes are locked on Henry. I swear to the Goddess, he's aged ten years in a single afternoon. My heart breaks seeing the pain in his warm eyes, and I reach out to him. "He's not gone, Henry." I whisper, unable to help myself. "I would know if he was."

Henry's eyes fall shut as his handsome features twist into a grimace. "My darling, I don't want to believe it any more than you do, but we can't pretend this isn't real."

"You weren't with your mate when she died, right?" I ask determinedly. "You were away from her, so could you feel it when she passed, even though she was out of reach of your bond?"

Henry sighs, looking as though he doesn't want to answer. "Yes, but that's different... we were fated."

"My bond with Dominic is no weaker just because we chose each other." I argue. "He's told me that it's stronger even than what he shared with Linda."

"That may be so, but it's still different." Henry cautions me. Cora stays silent, snuggling beside me and watching our debate unfold with wide eyes.

"And what of your bond with him?" I demand. "Shifter parents have bonds with their pups from just days after they're conceived. Surely you would feel it if your bond with Dominic was broken? Surely it would hurt every bit as much, if not more than losing your mate?"

As soon as I ask the question, a new fear assaults me... maybe Henry did feel it, and I didn't. I brace myself for a terrible blow, but Henry says. "I saw that wreckage just like you did. We saw the bodies. Whether we can feel it or not, no one could survive that... not even Dominic. I'm afraid he was simply too far away, even the strongest bonds have their limits."

"What are you saying?" I cry. "Why is everyone so ready to believe this! How can you be willing to believe it if there's even the slightest hope?"

"I'm not!" For the first time since I've met him, Henry raises his voice at me, and I flinch in shock and alarm. "That's the last thing I want, Ella! No parent is ever ready to believe

their child is gone!” He wheels away from the bed, then back, his face livid with color.

“But I can’t help Dominic by living in denial – I can’t help you or our people by refusing to believe the evidence in front of my face! If he’s out there then why haven’t we heard from him? You were on the phone with him, he’ll know we must all think he’s dead, so why hasn’t he been in contact, why hasn’t the storm forest alpha found him!”

Neither Cora or I make a sound. Our upbringing taught us to freeze and make ourselves as small as possible in the face of this kind of anger. I reflexively try to shield Cora and my belly from Henry, and when he sees the protective movement, he breaks. “I’m sorry,” He utters hoarsely, full of remorse. “I didn’t mean to raise my voice. But you have to know that this is a tragedy for all of us.

For our family more than anyone else, but a tragedy for the entire continent. No one wants to believe it’s real Ella. You’re not alone in that, and when you come to accept what’s happened, you won’t be alone in your grief either... but you need to accept it. Dominic is gone.” His voice breaks, tears streaming down his cheeks. “And he’s not coming back.”

Chapter 207 – Cora Comforts Roger

3rd Person

Cora wasn't sure what she was doing.

Her sister needed her, so why was she walking away from Ella's suite? Why wasn't she offering to help make arrangements for a funeral, or trying to help Henry convince the stubborn Luna to accept her loss and focus on caring for herself and the baby? Why was she determinedly walking the same path she had only nights before, when she'd been vulnerable and reckless enough to seek out Roger?

Because you've lost your damn mind. She thought bitterly. Worrying about a man who doesn't deserve your time or attention – someone who betrayed his own family and endangered Ella's life. So what if he's gorgeous and clever, so what if he understands you even better than you understand yourself... and makes your stomach go all soft and squishy everytime he looks at you with those fierce wolf eyes... he's still a scoundrel. He can't be trusted.

But despite Cora's confused inner musings, she was worried. She hadn't seen hide nor hair of Roger since the news broke about Sinclair's death – and that was three days ago. Ella may not have realized it, but after she collapsed the doctor sedated her for a full 72 hours, and Cora knew that was part of why this was such a struggle. Ella was waking up as if his death had just happened, but the rest of them had been battling through the last few days without her. They'd exhausted every possibility, every hope, and eventually accepted what Ella could not.

When she reached Roger's rooms, Cora knocked softly, unsure if he was even there. However her question was soon answered, when a bitter growl sounded from somewhere inside. "Go away!"

"Roger, it's me." Cora called, fighting back a quiver of fear. "I just wanted to check on you."

"I said go away." He barked again, and Cora thought she heard something smash.

Taking a deep breath, Cora summoned all her courage, briefly wondering if she'd lost her mind. She knew better than to interfere with a man in such a state, and though his harsh words and angry tone sent nervous tremors through her body, she couldn't help herself. She turned the door handle and warily opened the door. The scene which met her was more concerning than anything she'd imagined.

His suite was a bit larger than hers, but no less opulent – at least it had been. Now it lay in ruins – every piece of furniture had been broken or toppled, every decorative vase and framed portrait smashed and ripped. Papers and shards of glass, pottery and wood

fragments littered the floors, making the room nearly impassable. Cora sucked in a shocked breath, pressing her hand over her mouth to suppress the sound.

“What the hell are you doing? Don't you have ears?” Roger snapped, appearing in the door to the bedroom. He was shirtless, dark trousers slung low on his hips, muscles rippling on his abdomen and arms. His dark hair was tousled and a thick layer of stubble swathed his cheeks. In his balled fist he held a half empty bottle of dark brown liquor, and he was swaying slightly on his feet, his eyes unfocused.

Cora cursed in her mind, suddenly wishing she'd come earlier. Roger was clearly in very bad shape, and she wasn't sure if he was a threat to her in this condition. “I'm sorry.” She stammered, trying and failing to look at anything but the mess or his contoured muscles. “But, from the looks of it, you're not doing well.”

“Of course I'm not doing well!” Roger bit, taking a swig from the bottle and stalking forward. He trod over the debris as if he didn't even realize it was there, and Cora winced as glass and splinters dug into the soles of his bare feet. Blood seeped out to blend in the wreckage, and Cora gulped as he drew nearer. “My baby brother is dead.” Roger reminded her – as if she could forget. “How would you be?”

Cora felt herself cowering, even though she knew better. The last thing you're ever supposed to do with an irate wolf is behave like prey, and here she was flooded with adrenaline and contemplating flight. “Not like this.” Cora managed to utter, glancing again at the destroyed suite, i

“Well I'm sorry if my grief is messier than yours.” Roger sniped, closing the door behind her and making her flinch.

Why do you even care? I thought you were never speaking to me again.”

“I wasn't planning on it,” She admitted, “but given what happened I... I just thought...”

“Wanted to check to see if I was celebrating?” Roger suggested coldly, still prowling forward until Cora had no choice but to back away, her shoulder blades colliding with the door. “I finally got what I wanted right? Dominic out of the way and the pack in need of an Alpha?”

“Of course not!” Cora countered sharply. “I knew you would be sad, I just wasn't prepared for you to be quite so...” She trailed off, trying to find the right word before he growled and she involuntarily squeaked, “rabid.”

Roger laughed without humor. “Why not? Don't you think I'm some sort of monster? Isn't this exactly what you expect of me?”

“Stop it!” Cora hissed, trying to cease the shaking in her voice. “I know what you’re doing Roger and you can’t bully me into leaving so that you can carry on wallowing this way.”

“Why? Isn’t it working?” He demanded, lowering his head to her neck and drinking in her scent. Cora’s stomach flipped, and she could smell the whisky on his breath. “I can taste your fear, little human. That’s how strong it is. So why aren’t you running away?”

“I’m not going to.” Cora insisted, clenching her eyes shut. “Because I know you won’t hurt me.”

“Is that so?” Roger rumbled ominously, trailing a finger down the length of her arm, extending a claw but only letting it graze her with a featherlight touch. “And how do you know that.”

“You said it yourself.” Cora croaked, trying to ignore the sensation of his warm breath on her skin, his proprietary touches, which seemed to set her entire body ablaze. “We’re kindred spirits. I know that no matter how terrible and unforgivable your thoughts might have been towards your brother at the height of your anger and jealousy, losing him is a loss from which you will never recover. And your grief is all the worse for how cruel you’ve been to him in the past.”

She gulped, “And I... I know you won’t hurt me because I’m not the one you’re angry with... I’m not the one you hate.”

“So who is?” Roger asked, his gravelly voice like a caress.

“Yourself.” Cora breathed, wondering how in the Goddess’s name she could be so frightened and turned on at the same time. She couldn’t deny the way standing up to an unhinged wolf terrified her, but the mere fact that she was able to do so was something of a miracle. Cora had never been able to stand up to anyone this way, and Roger was a hundred times more dangerous than any of the people she’d come up against in the past. Then there was the way he was looking at her, the way he was touching her – impossibly gentle despite his menacing behavior.

She watched as her accusation hit home, and suddenly Roger’s eyes shuttered. His shoulders sagged as some of the chaotic energy ebbed out of him, and the next thing Cora knew, he was resting his forehead on her shoulder, one of his powerful hands gripping her waist as tightly as he gripped the liquor bottle. “I just got him back...” Roger murmured miserably. “I wasted so many years blaming him for things he couldn’t control, ignoring him when all he wanted was to be my friend.” A drop of moisture landed on Cora’s skin, and she realized Roger was crying. Tentatively, Cora wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, wondering how it was possible for anyone to be so huge. She settled one hand in his dark hair, stroking the silky locks as he continued to bare his soul.

"I was never the brother I should have been. I never looked out for him or taught him about the world. I didn't protect him when we were little, and I didn't do it now – when he needed me most." He heaved a sob. "It was my job and I failed him." i

The liquor bottle dropped to the ground, just one more piece of debris in all the ruin, and Roger clamped his arms around Cora's middle, squeezing her tightly as he bore his soul. Any threat or sensual intent was gone now, and Cora stroked and soothed him as he wept. There were tears in her own eyes too, in sympathy for his loss, but also for her own mistakes with her sister.

This hadn't been what she planned when she came looking for Roger, but she was glad she'd listened to her instincts. Roger clearly needed comforting, and even though she decided not to let this change anything between them, she was only too eager to take care of him... she didn't want to think about why that might be the case. She simply leaned into his arms, and gave him the solace he desperately needed.

Chapter 208 – Isabel Comforts Ella

Ella

Four days. Four days since Sinclair's car was bombed in West Vanara, and four days since I last heard his voice.

I refuse to believe he's gone. I know the others have given up hope, but they don't know my mate like I do, and they don't have our bond. I don't know where he is or why we haven't heard from him, but I know he's out there somewhere. If the doctor would just let me out of this bed I'd go find him myself.

Unfortunately he's keeping me under lock and key, and a roster of babysitters have been assigned to watch me. Honestly it's insulting, but I suppose my first few escape attempts might have given him cause to worry. The first time I slipped out past my guards I made it all the way down to the second floor before Philippe caught up with me and hauled me back. The second time, I only made it down the hall, and the third was dead in the water before I could even finish making a rope out of my bed sheets. That was about the time the bossy wolves who seem to think they can tell me what to do now that Sinclair is... out of reach... decided I needed constant supervision.

I know everyone is trying to be patient with me, novelxo but they're dealing with their own grief too, and the doctor frightened them about my condition. If they would just listen, I would tell them that the best possible solution for my stress would be to find Sinclair and bring him home. Nothing will help more than having him with me... but they won't listen, so I'm stuck here – lying around in my nest and banned from working.

"This is stupid." I complain, glaring at Isabel. "Shouldn't you be in the nursery?"

"The King thought my experience dealing with whiny babies made me ideally suited to look after you." Isabel responds coolly. "And James is with the pups."

I glance at her curiously. "How's that going? You and James?"

Isabel shoots me a withering look. "Why don't you worry about yourself, Princess." Though many people now address me seriously with this title, from Isabel it's pure derision. "You haven't slept, you haven't eaten or washed your filthy hair. If you truly believe your mate is out there, then you might want to pull yourself together so he doesn't have to come home to a hot mess."

She has a point, but only just. I didn't sleep last night, but I was so rested from my long sedation that staying awake wasn't even a challenge. And how can a she-wolf have an appetite or think about hygiene when her mate is in mortal danger? novel.xo "You don't think I'm crazy?" I ask hesitantly.

“Would it matter if I did?” Isabel arches a brow. “You don’t care that the others think you’ve lost your marbles.”

“No...” I confirm, staring at my lap. “But you’ve lost a mate, you know how it feels.”

“That’s different.” Isabel snaps, “I was there when my mate died. I saw it and I felt it, there was no doubt he was gone and no room for hope.” She glances at me with an unreadable look in her eye. “If I were in your shoes...

I expect I’d do exactly the same as you are.”

“Can I ask...” her face shutters as soon as the words leave my lips, novexo but I’ve already begun. “How did it happen?”

At first I’m sure she won’t answer the question, but Isabel shifts in her seat and purses her lips. “It was more than a year ago, before any of this started.” She explains, surprising me. Still, the emotion in her voice from sharing these basic details makes me regret asking this of her. “Our baby, Sophie, was only a month old, and we were both exhausted and overjoyed. Daniel was absolutely besotted with her, and in a lot of ways, he was better with her than I was. I had a really difficult birth and my body was wrecked. Nothing seemed to go right, not breastfeeding or my recovery – it was overwhelming and I was so worried about doing everything right that I forgot to enjoy it. I was in love with her too... I just didn’t cope as well.”

“Then one day we were out at the park, just having a family picnic. We heard someone scream, and then we saw rogues racing towards us. Daniel pushed the baby into my arms and told me to run... I didn’t realize in the moment that he meant to stay and fight, to hold them off so we could get away. I thought he was going to be right behind us, but all my instincts were to protect Sophie, so I ran. Then I felt it. I felt our bond shatter and fall away, as if my own soul was slipping from my body.” Isabel shares, tears streaming down her cheeks. “And when I turned back... I saw him lying on the ground with his throat ripped out, a rogue still standing above him, nvēlx.o goring him with his claws.”

I’m reaching for her, and to my surprise, she comes into my arms. “At first, I didn’t want to live without him. I fell into a terrible depression, and nothing anyone tried could bring me out of it. It wasn’t until a couple of months later, when Sophie woke me up in the middle of the night.” Isabel sighs, “I hadn’t been... I’d wanted her so badly before she arrived, and then with all the difficulties and losing Daniel – I wasn’t the mother I should have been, let’s just say that. But that night I went to feed her, and her eyes had changed color. They were blue when she was born, but there she was looking up at me, with Daniel’s amber eyes.”

Isabel sniffs. “It was a wakeup call. A realization that I would always have a piece of Daniel as long as I had Sophie. And Goddess how I hated myself for neglecting her, for

letting my grief make me forget what a miracle she was. Everything turned around that night. I finally became the mother I was meant to be, the one who would have made Daniel proud – the one Sophie deserved.” She swipes at a tear. “She was my entire world... and then Damon took over, and we were forced to run.”

I wait for her to continue, but I fear this loss was too recent. I already know what happened anyway... Isabel made it, and her daughter did not. “I’m so sorry, Isabel.” I profess, cuddling her close, tears in my own eyes. “No one should have to go through what you have. I wish there was some way I could make it right.”

“You’ve done plenty.” Isabel hiccups. “You gave me the nursery. You brought all of us here.”

For a long moment we just lie there in each others arms, and then the baby kicks in my womb, thumping his foot against Isabel’s side. To my surprise Isabel smiles and reaches out to rest her hand on my navel. “Hello munchkin.”

“Can I ask you something?” I inquired uncertainly.

She nods, and I confess, ‘The other day, after the phone call with Dominic, I was worried about upsetting the baby. So I tried to cut myself off from him.’

“We’ve all made that mistake.” Isabel replies knowingly. “It’s a lesson every parent has to learn: that having you is better for them, even if you’re upset.” She grimaces, “and it tells you just how traumatizing losing a parent truly is for a pup... How much they need you, rely on you to guide and shelter them.”

“Is it possible to bond with an adopted child that way?” I ask, thinking of all the children in the nursery.

“Of course, just like chosen mates bond.” Isabel confirms. “You fall in love, and you claim them. It’s a different kind of mark, but it’s every bit as powerful.”

“Will you claim Sadie?” I inquire, my heart aching to think the infant has been feeling the way my own babe did the other day.

“When I’m ready.” Isabel reveals, looking torn. “I know it would be better for her to have it sooner, I just can’t help feeling that it’s a betrayal of Sophie.” ‘That’s nonsense.’ I tell her, knowing James already shared this sentiment with her. “You know as well as I do that loving one child doesn’t mean you love another any less, or that you forget them.”

“It’s not just that... it’s that I think if the tables were turned and Sophie had lived instead of me... I would have felt jealous if she bonded to a new mother so quickly. I was her mother – me, not some random she-wolf who accidentally stumbled upon her.” Isabel

relates guiltily.

“Isabel.” I murmur seriously. ‘Think about how it felt when you tried to cut yourself off from her, how afraid and unmoored she was. Would you really rather she be in that pain, than connect with someone who will love her like only you could?’”

She clamps her eyes shut, choking on her tears. “No.” She cries, gasping. ” No, I would be sad if she forgot me, but I’d much rather she always feel safe and happy.”

“Exactly.” I say, “Don’t make Sadie wait. You already love her and there’s no use denying it.”

Before Isabel can respond, I feel a tug deep in my chest, a pang of intense love that feels very far away. I jerk upright in my nest. I know that feeling!

A moment after I’ve thought it, I hear a familiar, beloved voice in my mind. Ella?!

I’m out of bed in an instant, dislodging a suddenly disgruntled Isabel. “It’s Dominic!”

Chapter 209 – Ella Breaks Out

Ella

Isabel stares after me with her mouth gaping open in shock, not moving from the bed. I don't pause to put on appropriate clothing or even don shoes, instead sprinting to my door and pressing my ear to the wood. After a moment Isabel recovers and comes to stand beside me. "What are you doing?" She whispers, her pretty eyes wide.

I lead her back from the doorway, pressing my finger to my lips. The feeling of my mate is growing stronger by the second, and his voice calls out again. Ella!

I hear you! I send back through our bond, praying he can hear me. I'm coming, Dominic. The baby is fluttering excitedly in my belly, and I have a feeling that when Sinclair isn't calling to me, he's calling to Rafe. Still, when his voice sounds again he says only my name, Ella! Through the distance I can sense his exhaustion and worry, the nearly unhinged determination of his wolf. There's pain there too, and I know he must be injured. He's trying to get back to us, but he's too worn down and depleted to communicate beyond these simple calls.

"I have to get out of here." I tell Isabel, speaking as quietly as I can. "Dominic is... I can feel him, he's calling me. But he's hurt, I have to reach him."

Isabel blinks, "Are you sure?"

I cut my eyes to her, "Of course I'm sure, I know my mate better than I know myself."

"Alright, I'm sorry," Isabel replies, "I was just surprised. What can I do?"

"Can you distract my guards?" I request, wondering if she'll actually agree. This feels like the first true test of our friendship, but Isabel only sets her jaw and nods.

"I'll go out this way," She tells me, pointing to the bedroom door. "You exit through the sitting room. I'll keep them occupied as long as I can."

I nod eagerly and dash to the far door, watching as Isabel slips outside. Her voice echoes down the hallway, "Excuse me, can you all help me? The Princess requires some items from the kitchen but our phone doesn't seem to be working. Would you mind terribly going down to fetch a few things for us?"

I roll my eyes at her use of my surreal title, but I open the door as quietly as I can, peeking my head out even as the guards gathered around Isabel exchange uncertain glances. "We can't leave our post, Miss. Philippe's orders."

"Well I promised the King I wouldn't leave her side." Isabel frets, wringing her hands like

the perfect damsel in distress. “Maybe just one of you could go? I’m sure you’re all more than strong enough to carry even the heaviest tray.”

I slink away on tiptoes while the guards puff up their chests and debate which one of them should get to be her knight in shining armor, and I have to bite back a laugh when I catch Isabel batting her eyelashes at the guards. I disappear around the corner, trying to remember which of the secret passages Gabriel described to me is closest. I know there’s one on the floor below, but I’m worried someone might see me before I get there.

Ella, Ella Ella. Sinclair chants through our bond, filling me with all the courage I need to take this risk.

I’m coming, my love. I send back, moving as swiftly as I can. Suddenly I’m regretting my urgency to get out of the room without pause. I call attention on the best of days, and scampering through the daylight palace in my current state is not exactly discreet. I can only imagine how I must look: barefoot, wearing only a long silk nightdress, novelxo hair unwashed and disheveled.

Thankfully I make it to the passage entrance without difficulty, though I do have to hide behind a large statue until a pair of servants rolling a laundry cart pass by. For a split second I consider asking them to help me, but I don’t want them to risk their jobs by defying Gabriel’s edict to keep me in the palace. I know the King is worried about my wellbeing, not to mention outside threats like the bomb that intercepted Sinclair’s delegation. Still, I don’t appreciate his high-handed orders. So I move through the passages on my own, following the fresh scent of the outdoors to guide me around corners and through intersections.

By the time I make it outside, Sinclair feels as though he might be right around the next corner. His calls have grown loud and constant, but no matter where I look, I cannot see him. Ella, Ella, Ella. I open my heart to him and follow the path our bond illuminates, throwing caution to the wind as I reach the palace gates. The guards’ backs are facing me as they search for outside threats, completely occupied with keeping unwanted guests out, not holding anyone inside.

I dart out past them, ignoring their cries of surprise, and take off into the city. Within moments I hear footsteps pounding the pavement behind me, and I smell Philippe’s familiar aroma at my back. I curse in my head, there’s no way I can outrun the guards – I can barely manage a jog, cradling my belly and wincing as my swollen breasts bounce uninhibited. People stop and stare as I pass by, but I don’t give them a moment’s notice.

I know I’m caught a second before it happens, novelxo when Philippe’s voice is growling in my ear and his footsteps sound as though they’re right on top of me. He practically tackles me, racing up behind me and gripping me as gently as he can, infinitely conscious of my delicate condition. His arms come underneath my own as he pulls me

to an abrupt stop, and I go limp in his grip, hoping my weight will drag him down.

It doesn't. He supports my body easily, then scoops me up into his arms.

A crowd has formed around us, but the other guards keep them at bay, holding their arms outstretched and backing them out of the square. I'm not sure if it's for my safety or to keep them from witnessing the ensuing scene, but I don't care. novel.xo They can all watch, as long as I get to Sinclair, they can do whatever they like.

"Let me go, Philippe!" I command, raising my voice and kicking my legs as he hitches me closer. I thrash and fight as he tries to drag me back to the palace, wrenching his arm close enough to sink my fangs into his wrist. He hisses and reels back, but he doesn't release me.

Philippe snarls impatiently. "Damn it Ella, this has to stop!"

"You will never stop me from going after him!" I cry, returning his snarl with one of my own, "I will never give up, as long as he's out there I will always try to find him."

"He's not out there!" Philippe insists, giving me a small shake, "You've got to accept it, Ella!"

"You're wrong!" I combat, thrusting my elbow into his ribs, "You don't know! None of you can feel him like I can."

"You think we weren't bonded with him too?" novel.xo Philippe demands angrily, dragging me up into his arms, no matter how frantically I squirm. "That we didn't love him?"

"It's not the same!" I counter furiously, willing my body to shift. My wolf is right at the surface, every bit as desperate and outraged as I am. Still, I'm weak from the lingering sedatives and the lack of food, and I suspect the doctor's anti-anxiety medicines are keeping her from coming out. "I can hear him! He's calling me, he needs me!"

"You're delirious." Philippe sighs, sounding resigned now. novexo "You've got to get some rest or you'll make yourself sick."

"I'm not!" I explode, throwing my head back and slamming my skull into Philippe's chin. I instantly regret it as stars burst in my eyes and pain blooms through my cranium. "Just because you all don't have any hope left, doesn't mean I'll let you steal mine." I moan feebly.

"That's it!" Philippe grumbles, pain lacing in his voice. "I've had enough. You are coming with me now, whether you like it or not!"

“You can’t make me!” I challenge, a rush of adrenaline overwhelming my pain. I throw myself against the cage of his arms, but I can’t break through. Philippe holds me fast, and then his fingers dig into my neck, triggering a pressure point which I didn’t know existed. My vision starts to black out, but at the very last moment, Philippe pulls back. I don’t understand why at first, not until I realize that the sound of Sinclair’s voice is no longer ringing in my head... but I can smell him, as strong and potent as if he were right next to me. I look around, my heart soaring, but I don’t see him.

Suddenly a deafening growl sounds behind us, and my soaring heart takes flight. “Take your hands off my mate.”

Chapter 210 – Reunited

Sinclair

It had all happened very slowly. I heard the deafening noise, felt the excruciating heat of the blast, but when the explosion struck my body was thrown from the car. I remember sailing through the air, feeling as though I was traveling through water as flames and entropy eviscerated the vehicle where I had just been sitting. I hit the ground hard, my head slamming into the earth and stealing my consciousness.

When I woke, I was lying at least ten meters from the blast radius. My head ringing, acid churning in my stomach, I stumbled back towards the burning cars in a daze. I don't know how much time had passed, but my men were little more than charred husks, and the vehicles nothing more than tangled knots of molten steel.

I vomited onto the ground, emptying my stomach and trying not to let the horror consume me. I'd loved my men like brothers, but if I stopped to process their losses, my own life might be forfeit too. I did not know if the danger still lingered – or even from whence it had come, though I could certainly guess.

I quickly checked myself for injuries, noting the way every breath rattled and tore against my aching ribs, and the blood that seeped through my torn clothes. I shifted, and abandoned all thought of going on to the Storm Forest pack. For all I knew, my would-be assassin was waiting there in case their bomb failed. My phone was lost in the wreckage, and I was in the middle of nowhere, hundreds of miles from any being I knew and trusted. So I took off into the wilderness, letting the sun and moon guide me back towards Gabriel's city, not allowing myself to stop or rest even once.

I was terrified that this was not an isolated threat, that perhaps similar nightmares had befallen my family... my mate. I needed answers, but I needed to get back to them faster. I thought about seeking Ella in my dreams, but I was afraid that if I let myself sleep I might not wake for hours, and the people I love would be vulnerable without me for that much longer. So I forced myself to carry on, until at last the crystalline lake and gleaming outline of the capital came into view.

I started calling to Ella then, and though my heart pulsed and skipped gloriously when she responded, by that time I was so diminished that I couldn't think of any intelligible thoughts other than her name. I tore into the city at top speed, ignoring the gasps and shouts of the shifters I passed. And when I finally saw my beautiful mate, fighting tooth and nail to escape her guards, I shifted back into my human form.

I felt like I was on the verge of collapse, but I unleashed the remaining reserves of power I'd been holding back, and found the strength to stay upright. "Take your hands off of my mate."

I watch as shock reverberates through Philippe's body. His grip goes slack, and Ella takes full advantage, scrambling free and running straight into my open arms.

"Dominic!" She cries, squeezing me so tightly that my broken ribs scream in protest. But I don't make a sound, I swing her legs up into my arms so that I can cradle her against my chest as she buries her face in my neck, breathing in my scent. "I knew you weren't dead! No one believed me but I knew!" She sobs, pulling back only far enough to look up at me. Concern immediately takes over her lovely features, but before she can say a word I claim her lips with my own.

Mine. My wolf sighs in my head. Mine, mine, all mine.

I don't have any control left to spare, so all my love and longing from these last few weeks pours forth, along with all my pain, sadness and fear. Ella takes it all with utter generosity and pure passion, letting me drown her in my feelings and yielding her soft mouth for my feral exploration. She makes the sweetest little sounds as I ravish her with my lips, teeth and tongue, giving back as good as she gets and threatening to rouse my cock in the middle of the public square.

Naughty mate. My wolf purrs through our bond, and Ella only shudders and presses closer to me. Reluctantly, I force myself to drag my lips from hers before we get too carried away. "I missed you, trouble." I purr, wishing I had a free hand to explore her round tummy, and instead sending my love for my son through our bond. Rafe replies with pulses of excitement and affection, though I'm concerned to sense him holding back slightly.

"I missed you more." Ella insists, stroking my jaw with a mischievous glint in her gold eyes.

"Wanna bet?" I chuckle, kissing her again and never wanting to let her go. The last few days have been too horrible to bear- not knowing what I would be coming home to... if there would be anything left for me to come home to at all.

"Dominic?" My father's voice breaks my reverie, and for the first time, I remember we aren't alone. I look up to see Dad wheeling towards us, tears and amazement plain on his face. I set Ella's feet on the ground so that I can fall into my father's arms.

"Dad." I breathe, feeling like a boy again as he kisses my hair and rubs his strong hands over my injured body.

"I thought I'd lost you." He admits thickly, his face twisted into a grimace as he delves into our own bond. "You're hurt."

"I'll live." I reply, tears burning in my own eyes as I feel the grief he'd been battling over

the past few days, a grief I understand all the better now that I have a son of my own. "I'm sorry I scared you."

"I'm sorry I didn't listen to your mate." Dad replies, relinquishing his hold on me so he can reach for Ella. Her warm little body snuggles in beside us, and my heart swells to bursting.

"It seems we all should have listened to Ella." A new voice sounds from somewhere above us. "She's been a bloody terror since it happened ... but she was right." Gabriel informs me, though there is no bite in his voice. The King is standing above us with a wide smile, and not even the sight of my sweet mate glaring daggers at him can dull his joy.

I leave Ella in Dad's arms so I can hug Gabriel and Philippe, and then Roger is charging out of the palace gates wearing an expression I've never seen before. "You bastard!" My brother is all aggression, and he lashes out as he draws near, pushing me in the chest and forcing me backward. "You scared the hell out of me. Where the devil have you been!"

"Roger-" Dad tries to intervene, but I beat him to the punch. I duck Roger's next attack, and throw my arms around him, restraining his arms and forcing him to settle as he tries to fight me. He gradually softens, clutching my shoulders and leaning his head against my shoulder.

"Don't you ever do that again!" He sniffs bitterly.

"I'm sorry." I profess, "I won't."

"I love you, you dummy." He adds begrudgingly, and I laugh, though the motion sends pain searing through my abdomen. I hiss, trying not to let the agony pull me under.

At once Dad and Ella drag us apart. Ella nudges her way under my arm, as if she thinks she might support me with her weight. She presses her small hand to my chest, "Your ribs are broken, you should have said!" Her worry floods through our bond, though I can feel her trying to hold it back.

"I'm alright, sweetheart." I assure her, though my wince betrays me.

"You're dead on your feet." Dad corrects, looking to Gabriel. "We need to get him inside. He needs a doctor."

Roger and Philippe move forward as if they might displace Ella and cart me inside like some wounded war hero, but I wave them off. "Call the doctor. But I'm walking in on my own two feet, with my mate beside me."

'Your mate isn't even supposed to be out of bed.'" Philippe informs me coolly, sending a scolding glance at Ella.

She sends him a ferocious glare and sticks out her tongue, but for the first time I realize she does look a bit worse for wear. She's wearing nothing but a nightgown – her feet are bare and she has dark circles beneath her eyes. Ella said she knew I wasn't dead, but these events have obviously taken their toll on her nonetheless. I feel a stab of guilt for not noticing sooner, as well as an abundance of curiosity for what the clever minx has been doing to put the King and her guard in such a grumpy mood.

I shrug and slide my arm around her back and knees, lifting her off the ground. 'Then I'll carry her.'

Chapter 211 – Rafe’s Anger

Ella

I loop my arms around Sinclair’s neck as he carries me through the palace gates, trying to steady myself even as my concerns for his injuries grow irrepressible. “Dominic no, you’ll hurt yourself.” I object, sweeping my eyes over his muscular body. He’s naked as the day he was born, and his abdomen is swollen with black and blue bruises. His feet are bleeding, and numerous smaller bruises and cuts dot his powerful form.

He doesn’t seem the least bit bothered, though I suspect he’s using the last stores of his power to stave off the pain. “Hush now, I’ve been waiting weeks to hold you, you think I’m going to let some sore ribs stop me?” Sinclair quips, brushing his lips over my forehead.

I try to help as best I can, novelxo sitting upright in his arms and using his strong shoulders to support my weight. I’m in the perfect position to explore the curve of his neck, and my inner wolf won’t let me pass up the opportunity. I nuzzle his sweat-stained skin, kissing and nibbling his throat – letting him feel how elated I am to have him home, and just how badly I missed him.

Sinclair emits an appreciative purr, turning his lips to my ear. “Do you want to tell me what mischief you’ve been making to make Philippe and Gabriel so grumpy?”

“Nothing.” I reply innocently, giving him my best puppy dog eyes. “They’re just mean, ill-tempered men.”

Sinclair grins wolfishly, and my heart skips a beat. “Now why do I find that hard to believe?”

“Because she’s the most ungovernable she-wolf I’ve ever met.” Gabriel snorts from beside us, also smiling. “Honestly, you’d think I was nothing but a nobody omega for all the consideration she gives my orders.”

“I might give them more – if you were half the wolf my mate is.” I challenge, feeling thoroughly emboldened with Sinclair’s arms around me.

“Ella,” Sinclair warns in a half-amused, half-scolding tone, “Is that anyone to speak to the man who has shown us and our people such friendship and generosity?”

“Since he’s also the man who tried to lock me up so I couldn’t come after you when you were out there alone and clearly in need of help – yes.” I reply stubbornly, scowling when the King just rolls his eyes.

“I hate to break it to you baby, but the last thing I would have wanted was for you to be

out there looking for me with a bomber on the loose.” Sinclair remarks, affectionate but somber as he looks to his old friend. “I know why you felt compelled to come after me, but I appreciate Gabriel looking out for you when I couldn’t. He did the right thing.” 1

I huff indignantly, “But I was the only one who even believed you were alive!” I exclaim. “None of them were doing anything!”

“They didn’t need to.” Sinclair soothes, pressing soft kisses to my cheek. “I made it home, sweetheart.

“Besides, I’m not the one who put you on bed rest, Ella.” Gabriel adds pointedly, and Sinclair stiffens, looking down at me sharply.

“It was just stress because you were missing.” I assure him quickly, “I’ll be fine now that you’re back.” He’s still watching me suspiciously, and I’m willing Gabriel not to say more. Luckily the perfect distraction awaits us as we enter the palace itself. Word has obviously spread about Sinclair’s return, and it seems as if every shifter in the vicinity has turned out to welcome him.

The halls are lined with servants, Vanaran courtiers and refugees from home. The servants and Vanarans bow and smile, but the refugees drop to their knees with tears in their eyes, looking as though their prayers have been answered – which they probably have. Sinclair nods to each and every one of them with such respect, compassion and dedication, signaling that he sees and appreciates them, even if he doesn’t have the freedom to stop at this moment. I lean my head against his shoulder as my wolf overflows with pride for our mate, letting him feel every ounce of the emotion through our bond.

When we get up to our suite, Sinclair settles on the sofa with me in his lap, at last able to greet our pup properly. He runs his hands over my belly, his eyes drinking in every inch of my changed body. Just look at you. He marvels, his gaze lingering on my ever-enlarging breasts and the sudden protrusion of my popped belly button. I can’t wait until I get you alone. His wolf says in my mind. I’m going to strip you naked and kiss every inch of your beautiful body.

And you, my sweet pup. He adds, letting me hear his words to our son. I can’t believe how big you’ve gotten. I wish I could keep you safe in there forever, but I think you’re outgrowing your Mommy.

To my surprise, Rafe doesn’t respond, except to send a pulse of sullen energy through our bond – a request for my affection instead of Sinclair’s. I add my touch and my voice, thinking I might understand the problem,” Come on angel, you were so excited to feel your Daddy again.” I remind him, “Don’t be angry when he’s finally come back to us.”

Sinclair frowns, realization clicking in his mind. "I'm sorry I left, little one. Please believe me when I say that it was the last thing I wanted. I never want to be away from you."

Still, the baby seeks only my attention, and I can picture our son as if he's already been born. A miniature version of Sinclair in my arms, sulking because his father left – giving him the cold shoulder as punishment. He got angry with me for the first time too. I reveal to Sinclair through our bond. He's getting big enough to feel more complex things now, and he hates it when he can't feel us.

Sinclair purrs sympathetically, and I know that if he were able to take the baby from me and cuddle him directly, he would. He would bombard him with love and affection the same way he does to me when I'm cross, forcing the tiny tot to understand that no matter how far away he goes, he'll always come back. Of course, for now he can only hold me. Why did he get angry with you?

The same reason. I confess, grimacing. When our call dropped the other day... I was really scared. I wanted to protect him so I tried to shield him from my feelings. But I cut myself off from him completely and... it was awful. I'll never do it again, no matter how bad things get.

I thought you said you knew I survived? Sinclair inquires, frowning.

There's a knock on the door, reminding us that Gabriel, Henry, Philippe and Roger are all witnessing our reunion. Philippe opens the door, and the doctor sweeps in, immediately zeroing in on us. "Alpha Dominic, I'm so pleased you're all right." He sets his bag on the coffee table and opens it, extracting a few tools. "Luna, if you wouldn't mind?" He doesn't directly ask me to move, but it's clear he needs me out of Sinclair's lap.

I try to rise, but Sinclair's arms tighten around me. You haven't answered me, mate.

Later, I promise, though his wolf growls in protest. Let the doctor examine you.

He can examine me while I hold you. He insists, glowering at the physician who would separate us.

No he can't. I correct him sternly. He needs to see your ribs. Another wordless growl. Please, Dominic, I'll be so worried otherwise. I beg, letting some more of my concern filter through our bond.

Sinclair arches a brow, and his wolf lets me know that he sees right through my tactics, still he must sense I'm speaking truthfully, because he concedes. Grumbling in protest, Sinclair rearranges us so that his head is resting in my lap, the rest of his long limbs

sprawled over the sofa. He turns his lips to my belly and kisses my navel, novelxo early a tiny kick in the mouth from our pup. I hiccup with the force of the outraged thump, but Sinclair only chuckles and kisses the same spot again, sending praise through his bond with the baby. My little fighter, I'll kiss that foot as many times as you send it my way.

He does just that as the doctor pokes and prods at him, and soon it's become a game between father and son. Rafe tries to trick Sinclair with his timing and placement, and Sinclair does his best to predict the next kick so he can meet it with his lips. Absolute glee bubbles through my bonds with each, and I can only grin like a fool as I watch them, barely able to focus on the doctor's exam. As simply as that, the hurt and resentment the baby had been feeling amidst Sinclair's absence is healed.

I can't help but reach down and run my fingers through Sinclair's hair— which feels about as dirty as mine after so many days in the wilderness. novelxo You do know that my womb is paying the price of this little game of yours?

I tease. It feels like he's tap dancing on my organs.

Sinclair looks contrite, but also as though he doesn't want the fun to end. Do you want me to stop?

I can only smile, thanking my lucky stars that I found this man. Don't you dare.

Chapter 212 – Tattletales

Ella

“Four broken ribs.” The doctor assesses grimly, “and with all the exercise you’ve done since the initial brakes, they haven’t been able to set or heal. I have an injection I can give you to fuse the bones quickly, but it’s painful, and we still need to set them first.”

“What about his other injuries?” Henry inquires anxiously, seated on the other side of me.

“I’ll do a scan to assess the exact placement of his ribs, and I can extend it to the rest of his abdomen to rule out internal injuries. I don’t see anything else of concern.” The doctor shares with much more optimism.

“He’s got a good size lump on the back of his head.” I inform the physician, still running my hands through Sinclair’s hair.

“Then you two will match.” Philippe interjects, reminding us all of the way I headbutted his chin in my attempts to reach Sinclair. “When you’re done with him, you ought to check her for a concussion.”

“I hardly think that’s necessary.” I complain, reaching back to see if the area is tender, then reflexively wincing when my fingers graze the swollen knot at the back of my skull.

“It is.” Five dominant voices assert, the loudest and most forceful coming from my lap. I send Roger, Henry, Philippe and Gabriel mutinous glances, much good that it does me.

“I was already planning on examining her.” The doctor relates, having the unbelievable nerve to look at Sinclair now, rather than me. “From the sounds of it she’s been much too active following her collapse.”

“What collapse?” Sinclair demands fiercely, his eyes pinning me with a suspicious glare. I turn my indignant gaze on the doctor now, but my mate catches my chin and returns my attention to him. “Don’t blame them for telling me what you should have told me yourself.”

“And when should I have done that?” I argue, feeling truly overwhelmed now. I can’t believe they’re all ganging up on me when Sinclair is injured and needs our attention most. “You’ve been back ten minutes and you’re in much worse shape than I am. Rafe and I are fine, you’re the one we need to worry about.”

“What happened, little wolf?” He asks, his voice gentle, for I’m sure he can sense my genuine distress.

Taking a deep breath, I force the words out in a rush, speaking as quickly as I can in the futile hope that he might not catch all the details. "It wasn't a big deal. My blood pressure spiked when Gabriel's drones found the wreckage from the bomb, that's all. I passed out and they sedated me. I slept for three whole days, so I'm much better rested and healthy than you are."

Sinclair's pupils contract, and his irate gaze swings to the King. "You let her watch you search for the wreckage?"

Gabriel shifts uneasily from foot to foot. "Well, we didn't know what we would find. Besides, Ella is the only reason we knew something had happened."

"And did none of you consider the possibility that you would find us dead?" He sits up, power rolling off of him in heady waves, "It was sickening for me to see that scene and I've been in battle. What the hell were you thinking?" A flash of the gut-wrenching horror Sinclair felt when he woke from the bomb blast slips through our bond, and my wolf whimpers in my head. 1

"Dominic, it's okay, come back to me." I encourage, trying to guide his shoulders back down. He obeys, but I suspect he only does it to settle my wolf.

"It's not okay." Sinclair tells me, his voice like gravel. He reaches up to cup my cheek. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"It might have upset me, but it wasn't enough to convince me you were gone." I remind him, leaning down to kiss his pillowy lips, "My faith in our bond kept me from believing the worst."

"So much so that she didn't eat or bathe, or sleep again after she woke up." Philippe offers, his arms crossed over his chest. "She just kept trying to escape."

I tear my attention from Sinclair, truly outraged now. "Would you stop this?!" I exclaim, feeling as though I might scream. I'm so sick of my pack of overbearing babysitters that I could honestly throttle them. And for once, I don't give a single damn that they're tattling on me, I care that they might further upset my mate when he's already hurt and grieving. "Do you have any idea what he's been through! He doesn't need to be worrying about me right now. What is wrong with you all!?"

A tender purr begins to vibrate in my lap, and I can feel Sinclair's wolf reaching out to mine. "Don't be mad at them, baby." Sinclair murmurs, sliding his hand to my nape and massaging my tense muscles. "I know you don't like seeing me hurt, but they're telling me exactly what I need to know – what I want to know."

I shake my head defiantly. "No, you need to come first this time." I reply thickly,

wondering how they can all be so blind. “You almost died... you lost Hugo and your men.” 3

“And if I had died, they would have been doing exactly what I wished – taking care of you and Rafe when I couldn’t.” Sinclair croons.

“What, by being intrusive, overbearing bullies?” I sniff, hating the very suggestion of him truly being gone.

“Is that so different from me?” Sinclair asks with a crooked smile.

“Of course it is – because you’re my mate.” I reply fervently. ‘You’re only do it because you love me.’”

“Well why the hell do you think it’s different with us, Ella?” Philippe grouses, pulling my attention away from my mate.

“Because Dominic would disembowel you if you let anything happen to me.” I answer easily, my wolf feeling a bloodthirsty thrill at the thought of our mate’s prowess.

Roger rolls his eyes, sarcasm heavy on his tongue. “Guess again genius.”

Gabriel clears his throat, diplomatically adding. “I think what Roger means is – why would we have to fear that if Dominic was dead? If that’s the only reason we were doing it, why did we continue when we thought he was gone?”

I look between them, slowly piecing together the clues. When the realization strikes, I turn to Sinclair for confirmation. Do they mean what I think they mean? I mean I know Henry is fond of me but...

“Of course they love you, Ella.” He says, assuaging my doubts and making me feel extremely guilty for giving them such a hard time.

“We’ve been trying to take care of you because we would be heartbroken if anything happened to you.” Henry contributes, “And that’s why we’re telling Dominic what’s been going on – because we want what’s best for you, and he’s the only one to whom you’ll truly respond.”

‘That and you won’t tell him yourself.’ Roger mutters, but there’s only humor in his voice.

“Roger.” Henry bites, shooting the wolf a scowl before stealing one of my hands and squeezing it. “I’m sorry we didn’t listen to you, Ella. But I’m not sorry for the rest. We were doing the best with the information we had. But never doubt that we acted from a place of love.” 1

My lower lip quivers, and I stare up at the men apologetically. "I didn't realize... I'm sorry." I try to fight back my tears, but my hormones are unrelenting. I swear once this baby comes, I won't cry again for a year. I vow to myself, wondering if this is a promise I can keep. The tears come all the same, but I try to keep my voice steady, "I mean, not for disobeying you or smashing you in the jaw," I tell Philippe, who chuckles good-naturedly. "But for misunderstanding... I assumed the worst, and that wasn't fair to you." It takes a moment to work myself up to the next part, but I manage. "I love you all too."

One by one, the alphas return the sentiment, and Sinclair sends me a rush of affection which warms me inside and out. "Poor little mate, dealing with all these big mean wolves all on your own. It's no wonder you're in such a state." I can see Roger, Gabriel and Philippe making exasperated faces out of the corner of my eye, but I don't care.

"It's okay." I tell him conspiratorially, not bothering to hide my devious grin. "I still got the better of them."

'That's my girl.' Sinclair praises, pulling my head down for another kiss. It's soft and tender, and with his pride and amusement, comes a rush of delicious dominance. "Just as long as you remember that you won't be getting the better of me – even if I am weak and injured."

My wolf shudders happily, and I kiss him again. "I still look forward to trying."

His wolf gleams in his green eyes. "And I look forward to catching you."

Chapter 213 – Uncooperative Alpha

Ella

After we make our amends, the doctor makes short work of his scans and treatments, even the terrible injections into Sinclair's bones. Before long, my mate looks a thousand times better than he had when he arrived, and I'm still marveling at the Vanaran's state of the art medicines. The physician checks the goose egg on the back of my head and takes my vitals, but Sinclair is so exhausted that he falls asleep right there in my lap. Philippe and Roger move to pick him up, but I beg them not to disturb him. Instead I wave them away so we can be alone, and Henry promises to have some food sent up to us.

Once the crowds are gone, there's only my pup to wrangle. Now that things have calmed down again, he's eager to take up his game with Sinclair again, kicking his tiny foot against the wall of my uterus, just on the other side of Sinclair's cheek. Easy now, munchkin. I say through our bond.

Daddy needs to sleep.

I feel a wave of drowsiness from my womb, and send my support for the idea of a nap. That's it, rest together, angel. Soon both of my boys are quiet, and I'm free to gaze down at Sinclair and marvel at his beauty and strength, even in slumber.

As overjoyed as I am, my heart also aches for my mate. Sinclair might not have said it or let me feel more than a hint of his grief, but I know he's going to need as much support as I can give him after losing his Beta and friends. Part of me is still frustrated that the other alphas turned the focus onto me, though I understand they were doing what Sinclair preferred. He would never have been able to relax unless he knew the truth of my situation and appreciate that they helped him do that. But he's going to need me when he wakes – even if it's only to help him feel in control. I can't let him be distracted by my needs.

I run featherlight fingers over his stubbly jaw as he dozes, wondering if any she-wolf has ever loved her mate more than I love this man. What would I do without you, Dominic? I think reverently. I might be able to survive losing you, but I wouldn't want to. There will never be anyone for me but you.

Not for the first time, I wish I could fantasize about our future without worrying about the war ahead. But it looms too large in my consciousness to overlook, and a new determination takes hold in my heart. We have to get through this. I'm going to do whatever it takes to make sure our family stays whole and overcomes the battles ahead. I fall asleep stroking his hair and pondering the daunting possibilities, so happy to be reunited with him that I don't even feel my exhaustion until it has pulled me under.

I wake a while later, to the sensation of a gentle finger tracing the bridge of my nose. When my lashes part I find Sinclair gazing lovingly down at me, his emerald eyes like liquid in the dusky evening light. "I'm sorry to wake you, baby. I just thought you might like to have a bath with me?"

I'm still very drowsy, but as soon as the words are out of his mouth, I realize how disgusting I feel. With four days of accumulated dirt on my skin, I'm amazed I don't spell like hot garbage. I nod sleepily, and before I can say a word to stop him, he scoops me up into his arms. As he carries me to the bathroom, I notice an abundance of room service cloches waiting on the table, and my stomach growls loudly in protest. Sinclair chuckles. "Don't worry trouble, I'll bring you some snacks." 2

He's as good as his word, depositing me in the swirling bubbles and delivering a plate full of my favorite dishes to the wide rim of the tub. The gears of my mind are turning much too slowly, but I spy a bacon-wrapped fig and can't focus on anything else until it's in my mouth. Gradually I realize that the plate only bears enough for one, and none of the delicacies are Sinclair's preferences. "What about you?"

"Are you worrying about me, little wolf?" Sinclair asks, a knowing look in his eye.

"You need to eat even more than I do, and I know your father didn't only send my favorites." I answer, trying to look imposing so that he'll take me seriously. Of course, this is difficult when I'm still only half awake.

Sinclair kneels down in front of me, his mouth quirking upwards, "To be honest, I was so starving that I ate before I woke you."

"Oh." I breathe, disappointed but struggling to remember why I should feel this way.

Sinclair chuckles, "don't look so sad, in fact you should be glad you missed it – have you ever seen the appetite of a wolf who's been running for four days straight? It isn't pretty." He rumbles "I had to take a shower just to wash off the culinary carnage."

I giggle half-heartedly, my thoughts finally clicking into place. "I'm not sad," I correct him. "But I am worried about you, and I want to help you."

"You are helping me." Sinclair replies, sinking into the steaming water and pulling me into his arms with a low rumble.

"How?" I demand, "by letting you carry me around and pampering me?"

"I happen to like doing those things." He answers, kissing my neck. "Besides, this way my hands are free."

“Oh, going to grope me while I eat?” I inquire saucily, reaching for the plate.

“No, actually I thought I’d feed you.” Sinclair corrects me, intercepting my hand. A moment later he dangles a second fig over my head, tempting me terribly. It smells absolutely divine, and as much as I’d like to resist, my stomach is growling demands again. It seems my first bite woke a monster, and now I’m ravenous. I close my lips around the morsel, nipping Sinclairs fingers for good measure. Just you wait, Mr. I say through our bond, trying to smother a delighted moan as the flavors explode over my tongue. As soon as I’m full these tables are turning and you’re going to let me indulge you.

Is that so? Sinclair counters, arching one dark brow in warning. Clearly I’ve been gone too long, if you’re already so eager to challenge me.

Not challenge you, just make you prioritize yourself instead of me. I clarify, taking a bite of the sumptuous tart my mate is currently holding to my lips.

He chuckles, offering me the tart again. I lean forward to accept it, but just as I’m poised to take another bite, Sinclair replaces it with his lips. Silly mate, don’t you know that’s one in the same.

I whimper as he devours me, suddenly wondering why I’m so determined to argue when this incredible man is intent on wining and dining me. A moment later, I realize his own wolf is silently putting these very suggestions in my head, and I wrench myself away from him. ‘That’s cheating.’ I accuse, narrowing my eyes at the sly wolf.

“I know.” He sympathizes, catching my nape and pulling my mouth back to his, “I’m a bad, bad man.” For a few delicious moment, I let him kiss me senseless, heat pooling in my core as my wolf grows increasingly eager to reunite with her mate in the most intimate and sacred manner.

Eventually I return to my senses and wrench myself away. “Dominic!” I complain, pushing my lips into a pout and crossing my arms over my breasts.

Sinclair flashes his fangs, his hungry gaze glued to my mouth. “You better put that pout away unless you want to get bitten, gorgeous.”

I purse my lips, glowering, but when I try to speak he presses more food onto me, and I have no choice but to accept the offering. I moan as a delectable, warm mouthful of rare steak rolls over my tastebuds, and my lashes fall shut as I swallow the bite. When they part again, I find my mate waiting with another bite, but I don’t trust that he’ll actually feed me rather than stealing another kiss. When Sinclair sees my uncertainty, he purrs with satisfaction, and I realize he intended on throwing me off balance in precisely this way.

The uncooperative Alpha doesn't seem to care that I only want to take care of him, he's enjoying teasing me, overturning all my best laid plans. At a loss, I try to scramble off of his lap, but his arms lock around me, "And just where do you think you're going?" He rumbles ominously, eyes glowing.

I squirm helplessly, unable to decide whether I'm hungry, turned on, or angry with my mate. I glare up at him, and the fire in his eyes sparks hotter. Stop fighting me, little wolf. My mate's inner animal speaks directly through our bond, reaching out to my own wolf, calling to her instincts. This is what I need. I know you want to take care of me, this is me telling you how you can. Just let go, and trust me.

My body goes still, and my lips part on another silent gasp. Suddenly I feel like a fool – his playful behavior wasn't teasing at all, it was simply Sinclair showing me what he needed from me, and I've been too preoccupied trying to give him what I thought he should have, rather than listening. He doesn't need cuddling and pampering. He needs to feel in control, because everything is spinning out of control – only I can give him that.

'There.' He croons, taking me cheek in his hand, "now you see."

I nod, leaning into him for another kiss. Instead he places more steak on my tongue, shaking his head with that same ravenous expression. His message is clear: he makes the rules, and I hang on for the ride.

Chapter 214 – What You've Done To Me

Ella

We don't spend very long in the bath. As soon as I'm fed and clean, Sinclair takes me to my nest and lays me out like his own personal feast, and he wastes no time in ravishing me.

I've never been frightened of Sinclair. Not at his wildest or grouchiest, not even when he's on the warpath against others, or assailing me with the full force of his magic. If anything, it's been an incredible turn on to know that I can call such a powerful man my own, that I'm the sole soft spot in his impenetrable armor.

But when he makes love to me now, I feel afraid. Not for myself – never that – but for the feral energy I can sense swirling through his body. His wolf is in full control and he's near rabid with desire – ruthless in his affection. He isn't gentle, nor would I ask him to be. I love his rough passion and savage intensity: the way he makes me feel as if I'm the only woman in the world and he'll die if he doesn't have me this instant; the way he drives into me with reckless abandon and earth-shattering skill, drawing sounds I didn't even know I was capable of making from my mouth before he greedily swallows them with his tongue.

Still, there's a dark edge to his carnal hunger, as if it's not just sensual release he seeks, but absolution. The dominance he exerted earlier is nothing compared to the chaotic power fueling him now, and while I might not understand everything behind his actions, I realize that as much as he wants me, he's also hurting. I'm seeing the results of everything he's pent up over the last few days, and my wolf is only too eager to submit, to give him whatever solace we can, for however long he needs it.

So I give myself to him completely, letting him claim me over and over again, and trying to survive the endless onslaught of pleasure he delivers. At some point it becomes too much, and my vision blacks out as I crest the peak of yet another orgasm. I don't fight the darkness, because I know I'm safe in my mate's arms at long last.

I'm alone when I wake, and instantly I fear Sinclair's return was all a dream.

I jerk up in my nest, my wolf whimpering as I scan the room. However, almost as soon as the sound leaves my lips, a soft purr rises to meet it, and I shift my worried gaze to follow the comforting rumble. Sinclair stands on the terrace looking out on the sleeping city, but now he turns and strides back to the bed, "It's okay, Ella. I'm here." He assures me, wrapping me up in his strong arms.

I cling to him with all my strength, unable to form words just yet. My heart feels as though it just took a plunge off a high dive, without knowing if there was any water waiting to break my fall. Luckily there was, but my pulse is still racing with the fright.

Sinclair strokes my spine and kisses my hair, murmuring sweet nothings in my ear. It takes me longer than it should to calm down, but my wolf is seriously on edge after this last week.

“What were you doing?” I finally ask, unable to keep a petulant note from my voice, my inner animal thoroughly affronted that he scared me this way.

“I was just thinking.” Sinclair answers, his warm breath fluttering over my ear. “I haven’t had a moment to stop since the explosion – I’ve been so focused on getting home. But now I’m here, everything is hitting me at once.” As soon as he says it, he opens the gates and lets the emotion pour through our bond. I’m thankful that he doesn’t try to hide his pain from me, but the force of it is staggering. Not only grief for Hugo and his men, but confusion and guilt over how he survived when they did not. More than anything else, I sense a deep well of helplessness, brought on by his inability to protect the people he loves in all this chaos.

I hold him tighter, ‘They were good men.’ I tell him softly. ‘They loved you, they would have been happy you survived even if they didn’t.’

“But they shouldn’t have had to die.” Sinclair replies thickly, burying his head in my neck and breathing in my scent. “We didn’t even see the attack coming. We don’t know how Damon managed it, or where the bomber is now.” He doesn’t say it, but I can sense how badly this grates on his nerves. One more thing he can’t control, one more tragedy piling onto his conscience. “I’m so sick of this war, and it’s hardly even begun.”

“I know.” I say honestly. “And I know how badly you want to fix all this, how agonizing it’s been for you to see your people suffering. Please just remember that you’re not in this alone, Dominic. You don’t have to have all the answers. Your family, your pack – we all love you and we’re in this together.” I remind him, hoping the words don’t sound hollow to a man who has the weight of the whole world on his shoulders. “We’re all mourning for Hugo, for every wolf in those cars. Don’t let our relief that you’re okay make it seem otherwise, because we all lost a great deal in that accident. We’ll make sure they didn’t die in vain. We’re going to get through this.”

‘Thank you, baby.’ Sinclair sighs, his salty tears feeling hot on my skin. “I really needed to hear that.”

I nod, still a bit afraid to trust that he’s truly here, while also hating that his homecoming carries such heartache. “I would have told you sooner if those bullies had let me come after you.” I quip, only half joking.

“Mmm,” Sinclair rumbles appreciatively. “And I suppose that’s the only reason you were so determined to come after me? Because you knew I needed comfort?”

I'm suddenly very glad he can't see my face. "Not entirely."

"What else?" Sinclair asks, pulling back to look down at me and, as usual, filling me with the sensation that he can see straight through me.

I shrug and lean my cheek against his shoulder, wishing we didn't have to have this conversation, but knowing he won't rest until we do.

"Come on trouble, talk to me." Sinclair encourages. "You kept saying you knew I was okay after the attack, but that's not the way it sounds." He sighs, petting my sides. "You collapsed. You've been neglecting your health, and cutting yourself off from the baby? None of that seems hopeful."

"I said I knew you were alive. But I didn't know you were okay..." I correct him, staring at my lap. "And everyone was telling me I was just in denial. I was afraid to sleep because it might prove them right if you didn't turn up... and I think I was so desperate to come after you because I needed to prove them wrong. I needed to know I wasn't just blindly hoping. The truth is that I was terrified." I confess shakily. "You don't realize what you've done to me, Dominic."

Sinclair takes my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing away rogue tears as they slip down my cheeks. "What have I done, baby?" 1

The concern on his face nearly topples me over, but I manage to stay upright – if only because I need to reassure him. "Before I met you, all I ever wanted was a baby. That's it." I explain, still amazed by how quickly everything has changed. "I would have loved a partner, but you saw what I was willing to settle for with Mike." My mate growls at the sound of the human's name, and as much as I want to smile, I can't. The confession I'm about to make is too grave, too terrifying when our lives are so precarious.

"But you ruined all that.. you made my old dreams not enough anymore." I share, searching his emerald gaze for understanding. "You opened my eyes to worlds I didn't know existed, a kind of love I never dreamed I might have. You spoiled me... spoiled me for anyone else, nothing but you will ever be enough for me now." The worry dissipates from Sinclair's gaze, and he watches me with such tenderness that my wolf melts into a puddle. "I can't lose you, Dominic. I love this baby with every fiber of my being, but I need you too. I don't want to go back to the way things were – living a half life and convincing myself it was enough because I didn't know any better."

"You're not going to lose me, sweetheart." Sinclair promises, and I can tell he believes it, even though this isn't something in our power.

"You don't know that." I reply, thinking of Isabel, or Henry and all the people who have lost mates. "Look at what has already happened."

“Exactly.” Sinclair purrs. “Look at what we’ve already survived, look at the forces that have tried to keep us apart and failed. What can’t we do?”

I furrow my brow. “But-” I want to say that this is all still beginning, we still have the summit ahead of us, and who knows what other challenges. But I don’t get the chance.

Sinclair’s finger comes over my lips, “no buts, no what ifs. You’re my destiny, Ella. I’m not going to let anything come between us.

Chapter 215 – New Beta

Sinclair

Morning comes much too soon. My body is sore and aching, but I'm much calmer now that I've let off some steam with my mate. The last thing I want to do is leave our suite and deal with the fallout of last week's drama, but there is much to be done before the summit.

I begin with a visit to the families of the men I lost in the bombing, starting with Aileen. I give her my oath to find the men responsible for the attack, knowing my words are an empty comfort in the face of a life without her mate. These visits nearly break me, as I've yet to truly begin grieving myself.

In fact I don't even make it five minutes before regretting my orders for Ella to stay in bed and rest. She is the only thing that could possibly calm my wolf right now, and I dearly want to return to her side. I still hope to steal some time alone with her this afternoon – a final reprieve before the entire continent descends on us – but that will only be possible if I finish my to-do list.

Next I go to the airfield, needing to see the situation for myself. I'm astounded to see how large the refugee camp has grown in my absence, even with the families Gabriel has housed in the city.

Though each of the shifters I meet is grappling with profound personal loss, they're no less thrilled to see me alive and well. Their warmth and relief is a welcome balm, and I carry it with me into my meetings with the King's security services.

The enforcers assure me that everything is ready for the summit, and that security will be the strictest the capital has ever seen, but that's where the good news ends. So far, there are no leads on the bomber, and when I explain my miraculous survival to the assembled wolves, they can only exchange befuddled looks and remark that the Goddess must have been looking out for me.

I don't understand it myself, and even though Ella has proved just how present divine forces are in our lives, it's beyond surreal to think that the Goddess might have saved me. Even so, I'm much more concerned with discovering Damon's allies in Vanara, but I don't find the answers I'm seeking in the security offices.

I leave, brooding as I check another task off my list. By the time I reach the palace library I don't have any more clarity about who might have carried out the attack, and I'm at a loss for what to do. Thankfully Roger is already there waiting for me, and he greets me with an uncharacteristic hug. I return it enthusiastically, wondering when we last showed each other such affection – if ever.

"I don't know what to make of it." I tell him, quickly bringing him up to speed on the situation. "Obviously Damon orchestrated it, but how? Who is he working with? Is it one of the alphas here? Are there counter forces working against us right under our very nose? Did he somehow figure out a way to send people to Vanara?" i Roger frowns, his mouth twisting into a grimace. I wait for him to speak, but I can sense his reluctance. "What?"

"Well," he winces, "it could be one of the refugees."

I take a step back, stunned he could suggest such a thing. "I refuse to believe that." I argue, shaking my head. "You've been to the camp – you've seen what they've been through. No one there would help Damon."

"I'm not saying it would be a true refugee – but someone impersonating one." Roger amends, holding his hands up defensively. "And I don't necessarily think that's the case, I'm simply saying that there's only one way off the continent right now. So if Damon did send someone here, it might have been on one of the evacuation flights."

"If Damon found out about the flights and discovered the meeting point, he would just kill all of the refugees." I argue, not adding that I've been terrified of this very eventuality for weeks, 1

"Maybe," Roger agrees. "Or maybe he'd use the opportunity to send spies or assassins. You know? Find out where we are and what we're doing."

I smother a growl, hating this possibility but appreciating that he's thinking strategically. "You need to be very careful who you say that in front of." I warn gruffly. "That is the kind of idea that can spread panic and turn the locals against our people."

"I know that." Roger admits, "I don't like it any more than you do. I'm just trying to think of every possibility."

I grip his shoulder, "I appreciate that, and I'm going to need you to keep thinking that way if we're going to get through this."

"Of course I will." Roger vows, though his frown only deepens. "The real question is going to be how we investigate this without letting the public know our suspicions."

"Well, that can be your number one priority," I reply, watching him closely as I continue. "As my new Beta."

Roger blinks, doing a double take as if he's unsure he heard me correctly." What did you just say?"

Taking a deep breath, I explain. "I wouldn't normally try to appoint a replacement for Hugo so soon after his death," I confess, feeling a stab of guilt for even suggesting this when his loss is so fresh. "And I know it's a lot to ask when you spent your life dreaming of being Alpha, but I need a second in command and I... well, I want it to be you. It should be you."

Roger drops his gaze to the floor, a sober expression on his face. "I lost any interest in being Alpha the moment I thought you were dead." He shares grimly, his voice like gravel. "It was the closest I'd ever come to leading, and it's the closest I ever want to be. My personal glory isn't worth losing you – nothing is. You have no idea how desperately I prayed to have you back."

I feel a deep pang in my chest, undone by the vestiges of pain still haunting my brother's features. "Well now I am back, and I need someone I can trust by my side." I take him by the shoulders, encouraging him to look me in the eye. "Who better to watch my back than my big brother?"

"That's easier said than done." Roger counters uncertainly. "Betas are supposed to balance their Alphas, not antagonize them."

"They are..." I confirm with a grin. "Do you think you can manage it?"

"That depends," Roger quips, "how big of an ass do you plan on being?"

"No bigger than usual." I laugh, offering him my hand. "So are you up for it, or are you going to make me ask Philippe?"

He exhales dramatically, "And leave Ella without a guard? What am I, a monster?"

"I know." I grimace, thinking of all the soldiers I already have to replace. "At this rate my men are dropping like flies. I don't think I can handle losing anyone else."

Roger slides his hand into mine, squeezing with his full strength. "I won't let you down, Dominic. I'm going to find the people responsible for the bomb if it's the last thing I do"

"I know." I assure him, pulling the stubborn oaf into a hug. "I trust you, brother."

He chuckles, thumping my back with his fist. "Just wait until we tell, Dad. The old man is going to absolutely blubber."

He's not wrong, and I'm already looking forward to sharing the news with our father. Still, my to-do list isn't complete yet, and the scent of my mate's adoptive sister tells me I'm behind schedule. When we part I see Cora leaning in the library doorway, watching us warily.

'You rang?' She inquires, keeping her attention focused entirely on me. She doesn't even afford Roger a glance, and I realize that the burgeoning attraction between the pair hasn't progressed well in my absence. I'll have to ask him about it later, because right now my brother looks as though he's forgotten I'm here. He's staring at Cora with open hunger, and it seems to take him a minute to process her words.

"You did?" Roger questions eventually, looking at me when the information clicks.

'Yes, I need your help with something – if you're willing to lend it.' I amend hopefully. "Just before the attack, I realized that Ella and I never got the chance to throw a mating ceremony after our secret came out." I reveal, marveling about how much has changed in such a short time. "We've celebrated becoming mates in private, but we never had the chance to celebrate it with our loved ones, and I don't want to put it off any longer. I'd like to surprise Ella with a ceremony on the last night of the summit – before the ball. What do you think?"

Cora's face splits into a wide smile, "I think that's a wonderful idea. She'll love it."

'Then you'll help?' I ask.

"Of course," Cora agrees.

I glance between her and Roger, not sure the human realizes the full implications of my request. "And you think you'll be able to work together?"

Cora's freezes, her eyes swinging to Roger. My brother grins, flashing his fangs, and I can sense Cora forcing down an indignant protest. Instead she plasters a smile onto her features, and forces her next words out through clenched teeth, "I can't see why not."

I'm not sure who's more pleased, me or my brother. "Perfect."

Chapter 216 – Silent Treatment

3rd Person

As soon as Sinclair left Roger and Cora alone, the human turned towards the door, determined to flee. They'd talked about the mating ceremony for the better part of an hour, but as soon as they finished making their plans, Cora made a break for it.

Before her hand could touch the door knob however, Roger's voice stopped her in her tracks. "Oh so you're back to ignoring me, are you?"

Cora stiffened, turning back to the newly-minted Beta. "You got my sympathy when your brother was dead, but now that we know Dominic is alive, I don't see any reason to pretend." She answered with a shrug, trying to push away the memory of having the huge wolf's arms around her. Of course, that was much easier said than done – her mind was already carrying her back to that emotional night, and it was nearly impossible to forget the way her heart had raced when he touched her.

Roger's tears gradually slowed as Cora held him, breathing in her delicate scent and letting her gentle touch tame his rabid wolf. Soon his heaving breaths were low and steady, and Cora's soothing murmurs fell quiet. It shouldn't have been so electrifying – to hold a grieving man this way. But as the worst of the storm passed, the more intimate the embrace seemed, and suddenly Cora was so terribly aware of Roger's powerful body flush against hers that she could scarcely breathe.

She felt as though his hands were scalding her through her clothes, and his warm breath fluttering over her neck roused butterflies in her stomach. Gooseflesh rose on her arms as he emitted a soft rumble of appreciation for her comfort, and Cora wondered why her mouth suddenly felt so dry. Even though the big wolf had been vicious and unhinged mere minutes before, Cora felt safe and content in the circle of his arms, and more alarming yet – she realized she didn't want him to let go.

That was the last straw. As a doctor Cora was used to touching people constantly, and in the midst of the refugee crisis she'd done more than her fair-share of hand holding. But no one had ever blurred the lines of personal and professional this way, evoking deep emotions she should not be feeling – especially not for a man who infuriated her as much as Roger.

Cora extracted herself a bit too abruptly, but she attempted to cover her actions with a hasty cough. "You'd better let me take a look at your feet." She suggested, glancing at the debris-strewn floor. The wolf's blood mingled with the glass and splintered wood and Cora wasn't sure how to even cross the wreckage, but Roger lifted her into his arms and carried her through the worst of it, ignoring her protests.

"What are you doing?!" She'd exclaimed, wriggling in his strong grip.

“My feet can’t get any more beat up than they already are – yours can.” He explained, hitching her closer.

“I’m wearing shoes!” Cora countered, rolling her eyes.

“Well you can’t ever be too careful.” Roger answered easily, though she thought she saw the corner of his mouth twitching. He carried her into the bathroom and reluctantly returned her feet to the ground, but he didn’t release her immediately. Instead he leaned her weight against him, as if worried she might not be steady without his support.

Cora pulled away, becoming increasingly flustered. “Have a seat.” She instructed, searching through the cabinets and extracting first aid supplies. Roger settled on the edge of the bath and patiently waited for her to finish her search. If she’d felt brave enough to look over at the wolf, Cora would have seen the hungry way he followed her with his dark eyes, or noticed the smirk which twisted his lips as he listened to her pounding heart and racing pulse.

Trying to still her shaking hands, Cora sprayed warm water over the wolf’s torn feet, wincing when she saw all the glass shards imbedded in his soles.

“How were you even standing?” She inquired.

“It helps that I’m very drunk.” Roger answered, his eyes locked on her lovely face. He was finding it very difficult to control himself with the beautiful human, especially given the way she’d stood up to him so courageously. He knew it must not have been easy for her, and though part of him was proud, her skittishness was thoroughly provoking his wolf’s prey drive.

Cora’s knees were weak, but the familiar motions of her work helped keep her on balance. She methodically extracted the glass from Roger’s feet with sharp tweezers, then cleaned and bound the wounds with careful precision. ‘There.’ She said, wiping sweat from her brow, even though the temperature in the room was low. “You should stay off of those for the rest of the night.”

“But how will I get to my bed?” Roger inquired, arching a brow Cora didn’t like the sultry note in his deep voice, and she glanced in the direction of the bedroom. “I think you’ll find your bed is in pieces. I think maybe you should sleep in the tub.”

She rose to her feet, cleaning up her supplies, and Roger’s heart sank. He didn’t want her to leave, in part because he enjoyed her company far too much, but also because he simply didn’t want to be alone. Roger clamped his eyes shut, not wanting to remember the pain which drove him to wreak so much destruction. “I’m sorry for the way I behaved earlier.” He said, catching Cora’s hand before she could get away.

Cora frowned down at him. "I've seen worse." She answered honestly, "But I think perhaps you shouldn't be alone tonight."

"Is that an invitation?" Roger questioned hopefully.

"My medical opinion." Cora corrected. "The same I would give anyone in your state."

"Everyone I care about is in the same condition – or thereabouts." Roger lamented, feeling very sorry for himself. "They shouldn't have to deal with me on top of everything else."

Cora studied him closely. They were in an opulent palace with dozens of servants and guards. Finding someone to stay with the wolf wouldn't be difficult – even arranging a new room for him would take little more than the wave of a hand. So why was she so tempted to offer her own company? Why didn't she want to leave him? Why was she so bloody tempted to feel his touch again. "I could stay with you." She blurted, before she could think better of it. "If you like."

Roger blinked up at her, surprised but pleased beyond belief. "Really?"

"As long as you behave yourself and don't get any wise ideas." Cora answered, notching her chin up.

"I think we have plenty of proof that wise ideas aren't my forte." Roger replied, gesturing to the demolished suite.

"You can say that again." Cora snorted, sweeping her gaze around. "But I'll be damned if I'm going to spend the night in this death trap. I'll ring downstairs to borrow a wheelchair and then you can come to my room."

"Thank you, Cora." Roger squeezed her hand, but Cora pulled herself from his grip and crossed her arms over her chest. "You don't know what this means to me."

Cora's cold expression wavered, a flash of genuine empathy bleeding into her features. Still, she didn't let her guard down. "I mean it, Roger. No funny business." She stalked away before he could reply, giving him a delightful view of her retreating backside.

"Ah, so that was just pity, was it?" Roger questioned, calling Cora back to the present.

"That and my oath as a doctor," she shrugged. "I couldn't exactly leave you bleeding and practically suicidal."

"U-huh, and I suppose you hold all your patients that way?" Roger pressed, closing the

distance between them. He didn't stop until he was towering over her, and the delectable scent he'd come to love spiked with adrenaline. "And let them sleep in your bed even though you insisted they stay on the couch?"

"Only the ones who are giant cry babies like you." Cora bit, resting her hands on her hips

"Come on, admit it, Cora." Roger purred, stroking a lock of hair back from her face. 'You're warming up to me.'

"Don't be ridiculous." She insisted. "I showed you a bit of compassion in a time of need. That doesn't mean I've forgotten your past crimes."

'You're the only one who hasn't.' Roger reminds her, sidling closer. "I'm not saying I deserve it, I just find it curious that you can't move past things that your sister and my brother have forgiven. After all, they were the targets, not you."

"All that means is that I hold a higher standard for my sister than she would for herself." Cora argued, backing away until her shoulder blades collided with the door. She froze when she realized she was cornered, nervously licking her lips as Roger continued to prowl forward.

"I have a different theory." Roger shared, resting his hands on either side of Cora's head. "Would you like to hear it?"

Cora shook her head, not able to find her voice.

'You like me.' Roger declared, enjoying the way her eyes dilated with surprise and anticipation. 'You don't want to, but you can't help it. But instead of dealing with that fact, you've turned me into a monster.'

Anger and fear warred for dominance in Cora, even as heat pooled in her stomach. "I have news for you." She hissed, fire blazing in her veins. "I didn't have to turn you into anything. You helped Damon set this war into motion. You targeted my sweet, innocent, pregnant, sister because you couldn't handle coming second to your brother. You're trying to rewrite yourself as being deep and complicated and tortured, but all you truly are is a little boy with a fragile ego and major mommy issues." Cora pushed at his burly shoulder, and Roger took a step back, eyeing her warily. "If I'd known you were going to twist things this way I never would have shown you the ounce of humanity I did. But let me be clear, I won't be making that mistake again."

Without another word Cora turned on her heel and stormed out. Roger listened to her pounding heart as she retreated down the hall, and though she didn't know it, the sound stayed with him for the rest of the day, and well into the night.

Chapter 217 – Chasing Butterflies

Ella

I haven't been to the nursery since the news of Sinclair's supposed death broke, and when I walk in I'm greeted with a chorus of excited cries from the children. I kneel down and open my arms to the pups, making sure to kiss every cheek and nose I can reach. "Ella where have you been?!" novelxo One of the older girls demands hotly, crossing her arms over her chest, "It's been ages and ages!"

"Miss Izzy said you were sick." Someone else interjects before I can answer. "You can borrow my stuffy if you want, she always makes me feel better."

They're all clamoring for answers at once, novelxo and all I can do is offer hugs and apologies for my absence. "Oh thank you! I know, I've been gone too long – but I didn't want to stay away. That mean doctor ordered me to stay in bed. I promise I'm better now, and it's a good thing because I've missed you all so much."

More questions rain down, but then Isabel's firm but loving voice sounds from somewhere above us. "Alright pups, let's not overwhelm our Princess. Give her some space to breathe." I look up to find Sadie strapped to a frontfacing carrier on her chest, and though Isabel is trying to look stern, the infant is grinning and giggling as she bounces in her cloth seat. Of course, none of us take kindly to the matron's suggestion, and I simply bare my fangs and hug the little ones closer, laughing when their immature growls join my own defensive noises.

Isabel throws her hands up in exasperation, "suit yourselves then." She retreats, but keeps an ever-watchful eye on us as we continue to catch up.

"Is it true that the Alpha is back?" A little boy asks softly, his eager breath fluttering against my neck.

"A course he is!" Another small voice chastises him, just a tiny bit smug for being in the know. "Everyone saw him carrying her through the halls." A number of the girls titter excitedly, but the first pup only huffs at their antics.

"Well I dunno!" He complains, sounding thoroughly affronted as he cuddles a bit closer to my side. "The other day everyone was saying he was deads."

'We did have a scare.' I explain carefully, "but we were wrong. Alpha Dominic is alive and he's home now."

I regret the words almost as soon as I've said them, because a number of the pups look suddenly hopeful. I can practically see the thoughts racing through their minds – wondering if we were wrong about Sinclair, then maybe we were wrong about their

parents too. "How come you were wrong?" The boy in my arms inquires, confirming my suspicions.

'Well, I never believed he was dead.' I share, wondering if it's better or worse to be transparent when the/re this young, "but that's only because he's my mate. The King and the other Alphas don't have the same connection with him, so they didn't have reason to hope." It's not the full story, but it's the best I can do in the circumstances. "Does that make sense?"

I see a number of their young faces fall, no doubt reflecting on their own experiences with broken bonds. My heart aches for them, even as one of the girls nods glumly. "It's like when we lost our Mommies and Daddies. We felt them go – even though they didn't want to."

'That's right.' I confirm soberly. "I never felt Dominic go, so I had to believe he was still out there somewhere, fighting to get back to us. Thankfully I was right." At this point I'm sitting on the floor with half a dozen pups in my lap, and another six gathered around me in a circle. However I also notice a few unfamiliar pups skirting warily around the edges of our group – as if unable to keep themselves away. "Now tell me what you've all been up to while I was away? I see some new faces hiding over there – do we have new friends?"

A four year old leaning against my shoulder laughs. 'They're scared cuz they heard you're the Goddess's daughter.'

"Well that's just silliness." I shake my head. "Haven't you told them how nice I am? That I'm so fat I have to waddle when I walk, and I spend all my time sleeping?"

The children laugh and I see a small boy lurking closer, encouraged by the happy sounds. "Hello there." I say, peering through the assembled pups to catch him in my crosshairs. "Would you like to join us?"

He freezes and looks at the other pups for reassurance. I carefully shift the boy currently in my arms to make room, and extend my hands to the skittish toddler, "don't be afraid angel, you have all your brothers and sisters here to look out for you."

His face closes off, 'They're not bwothers or sisters.'

"Oh but they are." I correct him gently. "When I was a little girl I grew up in a home for pups without parents, but it wasn't anywhere near as nice as this place. There weren't lovely grown ups like Miss Izzy to care for us, or warm beds and yummy food. All we had was each other, and we became each other's family. I had dozens of brothers and sisters to love, who understood exactly how I felt – how lonely and sad I could get when I thought about my Mommy and Daddy." Some of the other pups are staring at me in

surprise, having never heard this story. “Family isn’t just about who we’re born, it’s about who we choose, and you can choose to have as many brothers and sisters as you want.”

“You didn’ have a Mommy and Daddy?” The tot inquires, edging a bit closer. “But they said you’re a pwincess.” novelxo There’s a note of accusation in his voice, and I wonder just how recently he’s joined the nursery – and what he went through before arriving.

“I didn’t know I was a Princess until very recently.” I explain. “In fact, I didn’t even know I was a wolf because I was raised with humans.”

“Wow.” The boy utters, coming close enough for me to pull him into my lap. He goes very still when my hands first make contact, but after a moment he melts against me, his defenses falling away.

“I didn’ thinks anything bad happened to princesses.” Another new face has joined us, a clever little girl who snuck up behind me.

“Bad things happen to everyone.” I relate sadly, offering her my other arm. She slips into my embrace, and I kiss her hair. “There now, you see? I’m not so bad.” I croon. “What a pair of cuddle bugs.”

“You smell nice.” The boys murmurs, nuzzling his head against my chest.

“So do you.” I answer honestly, breathing in his pure scent just as Rafe flutters in my belly.

“Hey, your tummy kicked me.” The girl exclaims, jolting slightly.

‘That’s my baby,” I chuckle warmly, guiding her hand to my navel. “He’s saying hello.”

“Oh, hello baby.” The pup greets, patting my stomach and looking up at me with wide eyes. “Will he be a prince?”

“I suppose he will.” I realize this is already true by my own bloodline, but for their benefit I add, “Now that Alpha Dominic is back, he’s going to make Damon pay for everything he’s done. One day we’ll all be able to go home, and when my pup is old enough to lead, he’ll take over from his father.”

The boy who asked about Sinclair’s death is still sitting in my skirts, and now he gazes up at me with wonder. “When I grow up, I wanna have a mate just like you.” He proclaims, “I wanna be every bit as strong as Alpha Dominic, so that no one can ever hurt me or take away the things I care about.”

“Do you want to know a secret about Alpha Dominic?” I ask, exchanging mischievous looks with the others.

They nod emphatically, leaning closer. I catch my mate’s scent nearby and know he’s on his way here, so I alter my words for his benefit.

‘Well, he’s all the things you say. He’s big and strong and brave, and he can be very scary when he wants to be, but deep down he’s a big teddy bear.’ I reveal, smiling broadly. “He loves cuddles and goopy romantic books and movies. He chases butterflies and even takes bubble baths that smell like flowers.”

The pups are giggling almost uncontrollably now, and I feel Sinclair behind me a millisecond before his booming voice detonates. “What on earth are you telling these pups!”

The children squeal and scatter with playful screams, and I turn to face him, batting my lashes invitingly. Sinclair places his hands on his hips, adopting a convincing scowl even though I can feel his raucous amusement. “Such a naughty mate, telling such tales to impressionable children. What am I going to do with you?”

I’m about to respond that I only spoke the truth, but before I get the chance, the boy who just shared his wishes to be like my mate steps between our bodies, matching Sinclair’s pose. “She’s not naughty, she’s the nicest, prettiest she-wolf in the whole world!” The poor boy is shaking like a leaf, but he stands proud and tall, determined to stand up for me.

I want to intervene, to reassure the poor pup it was only a joke, but Sinclair sends a warning glance and kneels down in front of the boy. “You must feel very strongly, to challenge me this way.” He remarks coolly.

The boy’s lip quivers, and his voice shakes. “I do. Ella is the bestest, you should only be nice to her.”

Sinclair settles a colossal hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Good man.” He nods, and I can sense the boy’s immense relief. “You’re exactly right and I’m glad Ella has you in her corner. I could use a hundred soldiers like you.”

The child perks up, “Really? You mean you’d let me fight?”

“Actually I was thinking of a much more important job.” Sinclair replies, “Maybe you could help look after my mate while she’s here in the nursery. She has guards of course, but I could use an extra pair of eyes.”

I feel my jaw drop in disbelief that he’s turning the pup into a spy against me, but then I

see the way the boy puffs up with pride. "I'd be honored, Alpha." "Then we have a deal." Sinclair nods, before gracefully joining me on the floor. He tugs me close and kisses his mating mark, before winking at the boy, "Besides she was telling the truth. I love chasing butterflies."

Chapter 218 – Stolen Moments

Ella

It isn't easy to extract Sinclair from the nursery, not after he delighted the children with confessions of his soft side and got roped into endless games of tag and hide and seek. When he eventually shifted into his wolf and started giving the pups rides on his back, I thought Isabel was going to have a conniption. Only naptime brought an end to the fun, though I wasn't thrilled when he suggested we go back to our suite rather than snoozing with the pups. Of course... that was before I realized he intended to nap with me – or not nap, as it were.

I waved goodbye to the children as Sinclair carted me out of the nursery in his arms, a delightfully rumbly laugh vibrating in his chest. "Couldn't we adopt some of them?" I inquire, kissing his neck. "Just a couple dozen?"

Sinclair gazes down at me indulgently, "Baby when this war is over we can adopt as many pups as you want, but I think we should hold off on giving our enemies more targets for the time being."

"Fine." I groan, throwing my head back dramatically. I hear an appreciative purr, and belatedly realize the movement has given the wolf an excellent view down my dress. I giggle, attempting to pull the fabric together to cover myself, but my mate arches a threatening brow.

"Don't you dare." Sinclair warns, "We've got limited time and much to do little wolf."

I can guess he's referring to the summit's kick off in the morning, but I'm surprised to see him so early in the afternoon. "Does this mean you finished working?" I ask, licking my lips.

"It wasn't easy, but I made it happen. We've got to steal whatever time together we can."

He kicks the door to our suite closed, and I hear Philippe and the other guards disperse to give us privacy. "Aren't there things we should talk about before tomorrow?" I inquire, not wanting to deal with business but also feeling unprepared for the politics awaiting us.

"As far as I'm concerned, that bomb upended half the work I did on this trip and we'll be entering uncharted territory in the morning whether we talk about it or not." Sinclair replies, tossing me onto the bed. "I would much rather spend our evening this way."

"But

"Ah ah," He scolds, eyes blazing as he strips off my clothes, "I've made my decision trouble."

I shudder as a low growl fills my ears, calling my own wolf out to play. "Bossy alpha." I accuse, wondering when exactly I became so short of breath.

"You have no idea." Sinclair confirms with a lethal grin, "I seem to remember telling you that I'd be keeping a list of all your bad behavior while I was away, but I have to admit I underestimated the extent of the mischief you'd make."

He towers over me, still naked following his wolf's antics with the children. His long, thick cock is already standing at attention, and any hints of the civilized, bubble bath-taking politician are gone. He's pure animal now, and my instincts are driving me to see just how far I can push him.

"I'm sure I don't have any idea what you're talking about." I quip, pouting my fully lips. "I only did what I thought was best for the pack."

Sinclair's corded muscles tense and flex, and he cocks his head to the side. His entire demeanor changes as the playfulness seeps away, replaced only with dark foreboding. "Is that really the tactic you want to choose, little wolf? Because I was going to focus on the small stuff -leave the serious things for later." He pulls in a deep breath, rolling his neck as he considers my prone form. "But maybe it's better we deal with everything now – that way we can put it behind us and start the summit on a clean slate."

I grimace, understanding him at once. I'd chosen the wrong words for our game and cut too close to home. Now Sinclair wasn't merely going to concoct sensual payments for made-up infractions like wearing clothes in his bed, he was going to address the greatest conflicts in our time apart – things that were part and parcel my fault. It isn't a prospect to which I'm looking forward, but I'd be lying if I said I don't feel desperate to heal the rifts between us.

I nod in agreement, dropping my gaze submissively. "I think you're right."

He leans over me, sliding his hand around my nape and pulling my lips up to his. "Good girl." He praises, "I'd thought to wait until things calmed down, but these things don't go away, baby. Best to get it out of the way." I nod again, because I agree. My mate almost dying was certainly a huge distraction, as is my lineage and the war, but the disagreements and fights we had along the way will only fester if left unresolved. No amount of distraction can change that.

"You know I love you with everything I am, and everything I ever will be?" Sinclair inquires, searing me with his emerald gaze.

"You know you're my whole world, and I'd be lost without you?" I counter, blinking back tears.

Sinclair answers me with a ferocious kiss, and then it starts: Every lie, every betrayal of his trust, every scheme and act of neglect for my well being. At times we go around in circles, ‘You were dead!’ I cry, about half an hour into the debate. “I needed to find you, I can be held accountable for a lot, but you can’t expect me to have lost you without grieving, or not to fight when I knew you were out there somewhere!”

“Of course I know you would grieve, but I need you to know that killing yourself or our child is the absolutely last thing I would want. I would hope you would move on and

“And what, forget you?!” I interrupt, “because I have to say if the tables were turned I would be pretty offended if you got over my demise in a couple of days!” I can see Sinclair getting ready to jump in, so I add, “ Besides it wasn’t that serious! I would have been fine!”

‘That’s not what the doctor said!’ Sinclair thunders.

‘You went to the doctor about me!’ I demand hotly, my cheeks flushing.

“Of course I did – you’re my mate and I’m worried about you.” He bites back, “So help me Ella, if I do die and you stress yourself into a coma, I will come back from the dead just to spank your impossible behind!”

‘Then I would gladly do it if that’s what it takes to bring you back!’ I explode, throwing my hands up.

“That’s not the point!” Sinclair rages, pacing back and forth, any signs of arousal long gone. “Don’t you get it, I’m not the one who has to survive this war – you are the one who was chosen by the Goddess, Rafe is my heir. You two have to live, not me!”

A little while later, we’ve moved onto my hypnosis sessions, a subject which devastates me more than anything else. “I’m sorry, I’ve said I’m sorry and I know it cost me your trust.” I cry, “I don’t know what else to do, Dominic. I can’t take it back, nor would I!”

‘You could have told me, even if you knew I wouldn’t agree, you could have been honest and told me you needed to do it whether I like it or not!’ He combats.

“And risk you issuing one of your Alpha orders?” I accuse, “you and I both know you would have used your power to make me promise against my will – which isn’t fair, by the way.”

“And we also know that you would have found a way around it because you’re too clever for your own damned good!” Sinclair replies gruffly.

“Well that’s not the point.” I throw his own words back in his face. “The point is not exerting your dominance over me when I don’t want you to! Forcing me to follow your orders when I don’t agree with them!”

He throws back his head and laughs. “I’ve got news for you, little wolf – that’s my job. If I only did it when you liked it, it wouldn’t be real.”

“Well maybe I don’t want it to be real!” I lash out, snarling and baring my fangs.

Sinclair is on me in an instant, his hands course and wonderful on my body. “Is that so?” He growls, daring me to test him.

‘Yes!’ I insist, notching my chin up as I finally see a light at the end of the tunnel. I know if I provoke him now, he won’t be able to resist taking me in hand, and in my experience this is the only thing that will help me feel better. When there’s no solution to our conflicts, we have to find a way to come back together as mates and put the past behind us, and he’s the one who showed me how.

‘Well then maybe we should put that to the test.’ Sinclair answers, bending me over the bed. “Get ready, trouble. You’re in for a rough ride.”

Chapter 219 – Ella and Sinclair

Ella

“Please, please, please?” I beg, resting my forehead on my forearms. “Hmm,” Sinclair rumbles thoughtfully, swatting my raised bottom with one powerful hand, while the other skillfully moves between my legs. He’s been at this for more than half an hour, though at first it was only a punishment.

He bent me over the mattress and started peppering my behind with soft spanks as he lectured me about honesty, health and safety. Then my legs gave out, and he moved me onto my hands and knees in the nest. That was around the time he started tormenting my poor, neglected sex – no doubt unable to resist the arousal pooled there as the result of his chastisement.

Sinclair leans down to kiss me between my shoulder blades. “I don’t know, as naughty as you’ve been, I don’t think you deserve to come yet.” He decides devilishly, but he sinks two thick fingers inside my clenching sheath, using his thumb to circle my clit as he curves the long digits into my g-spot.

“Dominic, I can’t hold out any longer.” I whimper, trying to wiggle away from him and only earning myself a few especially hard smacks. The pain blooms over my heated skin with delicious effect, sending currents of electricity straight to my already overwhelmed erogenous zones.

The sting is a perfect compliment to the pleasure my mate inflicts, and his utter dominance has reduced my wolf to a puddle of goo.

“Don’t even think about coming before I give you permission, little wolf.” He warns, a dark edge in his deep voice. “You’ve been running wild without me here, and that ends tonight.”

I bite down on my lower lip, whining pitifully as I try to keep myself from teetering over the edge despite his expert handling. It’s no use, the heady combination of pleasure and pain is too much for me to bear.

My mate’s fingers are thrusting into my tight channel, stretching me – preparing me to accommodate his huge cock. The anticipation only excites me more, and when he feels me begin to spasm, he pulls his hand free and swats my swollen clit. I moan helplessly as I lose control, not understanding the sensations ravaging my body.

Sinclair returns to stroking me as I ride the shuddering bliss, his hands not gentling, but driving me even higher. He doesn’t let me come down, instead forcing me to a second terrifying peak right after the first. I don’t recognize the keening cry which leaves my lips, and when I recover the ability to hear and think again, my mate’s husky voice is full of

triumph.

“Oh you bad girl.” He scolds, not sounding the least bit disappointed. Sinclair returns to spanking me, his fingers coated with my wetness and enhancing the burn. ‘You have a lot of nerve, trouble. What do you have to say for yourself?’

‘Your... fault.’ I gasp, tears burning in my eyes from the pure intensity of the experience. ‘You made me.’

The next thing I know I’m lying on my back, and my mate is hovering over me, his eyes glowing. He flashes his fangs in a lethal grin, and I know I’m right – he wanted me to lose control. “Excuses, excuses.” He growls, kissing his way down my body. “Greedy little wolf – stealing orgasms that belong to me.”

I toss my head back and forth as he nips and licks my thighs, knowing it’s no use arguing when he’s let his inner animal take over. “Such a pretty pussy,” he murmurs, chuckling when I flush an even deeper shade of crimson.

He hovers his lips just over my clit and blows cool air over the still -pulsing nub, and I hiss at the slight sensation. “Are you sore already, mate? I’m just getting started.”

“Am I done being punished?” I ask in a small voice, unsure of whether I want him to take mercy on me, or continue with his sensual torment. My insatiable wolf is still urging me to ask for more – to provoke him if I must

– but it’s my body which must pay the price of her demands. I can feel Sinclair delving into our bond, and I know he can sense this truth. I instinctively realize he won’t stop until my wolf is satisfied, but a wave of tenderness assails me all the same.

“Not even close.” He croons, crawling up my body to kiss me. It’s a rather chaste kiss, given the things he’s been doing to me, but when he pulls back he cups my cheek in his hand, his hungry gaze boring into me so intensely I want to look away. “I won’t give you more than you can take Ella, but we can always pause if you’re overwhelmed.” He reminds me. ‘You’re safe, and I love you, just keep the bond open.’

I nod, and Sinclair kisses me again, this time taking the time to explore my mouth with his talented tongue. He extracts kiss after kiss from my lips, and I get lost in the feeling of our lips dancing, our breath mingling. I’m drunk on the taste of him, already wondering how long I’ll have to wait before he claims me fully. Sinclair chuckles in response, kissing his way down my neck and petting my hip.

“Wait,” I object, wanting to pause, but not for the reason Sinclair thinks. He looks up from his lazy exploration of my breasts, giving me his full attention. “I really am sorry for everything that happened while you were away.” I whisper, tangling my fingers in his

dark hair, “for everything I did.”

“Oh sweetheart we’re past all that.” He purrs, stroking my sides as he sucks one of my beaded nipples into his mouth. This is just for fun now. He continues in my mind, flicking his tongue over the bud and teasing the other with his fingers.

I arch into his touch, relief coursing through me. I’m sure this fight will be one of many disagreements in our future, and I’m sure there will be times that Sinclair is in the wrong and I the right. But that wasn’t the case this time, and it is incredibly freeing to feel such catharsis – as if I’ve paid my penance and we can move forward together on even footing.

Fun for who? My wolf sasses, apparently ready to run rampant with her freshly clean conscience. As far as I can tell, you’re the one having all the fun here.

Sinclair nips my breast with his sharp canines, looking up at me with a devious expression. “That reminds me,” He proclaims, in a tone that makes me suddenly wary. “I took quite the journey through your dreams to find you in your nightmares, little mate.”

‘You did?’ I ask, curious about he accomplished such a feat, but also uncertain about why he’s telling me this.

“Indeed.” He nods, looking more and more predatory with every moment that passes. “Including a very heated fantasy you haven’t shared with me.”

If I thought his dirty talk made me blush, it’s nothing compared to the sudden embarrassment and panic I feel now. “Which one? I gulp.

He cocks his head with interest, as if he hadn’t realized there were multiple. “I think you should guess. Start with the one which excites you most – since you’re so worried about having fun.”

Something about his response gives me pause, and I realize he’s fishing – trying to make me reveal sex dreams he didn’t actually witness. I narrow my eyes. “Oh no you don’t, Dominic.” I counter, “I’m not going to let you embarrass me even more

“Embarrass?” He interrupts, frowning. “What is there to be embarrassed about? We all have fantasies, Ella.”

“Oh, would you like to tell me some of yours? Or some of the weird dreams you’ve had that have no basis in reality? I’m pregnant by the way, half of my dreams are crazy!” I remind him, getting more worked up now.

“I remember, baby.” He replies, kissing my belly and purring to calm my frayed nerves.

“And I’ll gladly tell you my fantasies. Though I have to confess that I already have plans to enact them with you when we have the time... and equipment.”

The last word makes me squirm in his arms, but his soothing purrs are taking effect. “Just tell me what you saw?” I request pouting.

Thankfully he takes pity on me, ‘Well, you were wearing a bright red cloak, but otherwise you were stark naked... and

“I remember.” I wince, not wanting to look him in the eye.

Sinclair’s suggestive purrs pull my attention to him despite my shyness,” We already have this room, which looks like a forest, and I’m sure I’ve seen a red coat in your closet.”

“You mean, you actually want to...?” I trail off, shocked that he seems so eager.

“Why wouldn’t I?” He asks, sitting up and pulling me up with him. “I love seeing you turned on, so I’m bound to find anything that gets you excited sexy.” When he puts it like that it makes sense, but I can’t help feeling uncertain. Sensing this, he adds in a growl, “Besides, it’s not as if it would be difficult to get into the role – if I was out in the woods and saw your luscious body flashing at me from under a little cloak, I wouldn’t be able to resist gobbling you up. I might even want to make you pay for teasing me.”

“I think I would feel silly.” I confess, even as a delicious shiver runs down my spine at the image he’s putting in my head, “what would I even say?”

Sinclair flashes his fangs, trailing his hand down my body, ‘That’s the beauty, sweetheart. The lines are already written for you.”

My sex clenches in excitement, and I take a deep breath, summoning my courage. I begin backing away from him on the bed, making my eyes wide and innocent, “My Mr Wolf, what big hands you have...”

Chapter 220 – Adoption

3rd Person

‘You can’t be serious.’ James stared at Roger in shock, not believing his own ears. ‘It’s just a possibility we have to consider.’ The new Beta replied gently. ‘Trust me, no one wants it to be true.’

‘Are you suggesting that I might have been responsible for bringing the wolves who attacked the Alpha’s convoy to this continent?’ James clarified, wanting to know if the Alpha’s concerns about Damon hiding spies among the refugees was purely hypothetical, or based on something more.

‘We don’t know anything for sure.’ Roger replied carefully. ‘But you said yourself that it was only a matter of time before Damon’s forces found the meeting point on the coast. It’s gotten too big to remain hidden.’

‘I did, but I was more concerned with increasing evacuations to try and save as many as we could before he brought the hammer down.’ James answered, wondering if he was at fault somehow. He’d certainly never viewed the fleeing masses clamoring for a spot on his plane as a threat, he’d only ever wanted to help those in need.

Moreover, he thought it was dangerous to start viewing them as a security risk. But when he considered it, truly thought back on the hundreds of flights which all seemed to blur together, he couldn’t say whether or not he may have missed something – or someone. ‘Have you checked the registration lists at the camp?’

‘For what exactly?’ Roger inquired, rubbing his jaw. ‘A spy is hardly likely to write ‘hail Damon’ on his entry forms.’

‘Well almost all the refugees are women and children, the only men who are fleeing have families to protect.’ James explained, thinking out loud. ‘The rest are staying behind to join the resistance. I can’t recall any single men boarding my flights, but if there are any registered at the camp, they would be my prime suspects.’

‘And if the spies are women?’ Roger countered, arching a brow. ‘It’s not impossible, but when has Damon ever hired she-wolves as anything but sex workers?’ James shrugged, ‘Knowing him, he would laugh at the very idea of a woman spy.’

‘You may have a point there.’ Roger conceded, making a mental note to review the registration records.

‘What do you suggest for security in the meantime?’ James probed, wondering if the Beta would have the gall to suggest screening at the coast. Roger read the other wolf’s expression with ease. ‘How bad is it, at the pickup point?’

James arched a brow, "How are you on planes?" "As long as I don't have to fly one I'll be fine." Roger reasoned, already guessing what the pilot was about to suggest.

James smiled. "Then come and see for yourself. I could tell you, but it wouldn't be the same. And if you're going to advise Dominic about this, you need to have first hand experience."

"Then you've got yourself a copilot." Roger accepted, "When do we leave?"

"Five am." James looked towards the door, no doubt thinking of his next destination. "I have a visit to pay in the meantime."

"Uh-huh." The Beta grinned. "A certain she-wolf with legs for days and a vicious growl?"

James only laughed, "Something like that."

A little while later he was striding into the nursery. Pups immediately raced to greet him, and as much as he enjoyed seeing their happy faces – especially after witnessing the fear and sorrow they'd worn when they first arrived here – he only had eyes for the beguiling she-wolf who watched over them. His eyes flew to her like a magnet, only drifting elsewhere when he realized her arms were empty for once. He quickly spotted a sweet bundle snoozing in a nearby crib and, heart swelling, he allowed his eyes to return to the willowy beauty at the rear of the hall.

As the pups self-appointed guardian angel, Isabel was aware the moment a new wolf entered her territory, but for once she didn't look up to investigate the interloper. James knew she was already so accustomed to his scent and the children's moods that she recognized him without looking. Still, she refused to look his way, but the hardened soldier only grinned.

He prowled forward, breathing in her wonderful scent and relishing the spike of excitement in her blood. Silly mate, who does she think she's fooling. His wolf purred in his ear, more than a little amused by her cold shoulder.

She needs time. James reminded him, reveling at how quickly and completely his spirits had rallied at the mere sight of her. Her heart sped up as he neared, and the steady beat in his own chest changed to match its melodic rhythm. "Hello Isabel." He greeted her, not stopping until they were almost touching.

Isabel jolted slightly, as if she was so busy trying to cope with his sudden proximity that she wasn't prepared to hear his deep voice as well. Her bright gaze flitted up to his before retreating again. "Hello." She answered, turning her back and making herself busy folding laundry.

A lock of auburn hair had fallen loose of her messy bun, and it trailed along the curve of her neck – tempting him. He caught the silken tresses between his thumb and forefinger, toying with the soft strands.

Goosebumps rose on Isabel's neck, and the hair on her nape stood on end. He was tempted to lean forward and kiss her, instead he simply let her feel his warm breath against her skin. "How's our girl doing today?"

"She's perfect, as usual." Isabel answered tritely, trying and failing to smother a shiver as his other hand grazed her waist. Apart from a single kiss at the height of her turmoil over adopting Sadie, James hadn't pushed Isabel to act on their chemistry. Sure, he wrangled the stubborn wolf into a cuddle every now and then, but when it came to true romance the soldier was determined to make her come to him.

He deliberately brushed against her as he shifted to the crib where Sadie slept, an incandescent and entirely unintentional smile taking over his features as he laid eyes on the little girl. The infant was sound asleep with her arms and legs splayed wide, a peaceful expression on her tiny face. He couldn't stop himself from reaching for her, even though Isabel's sharp whisper attempted to halt him. "What are you doing! You'll wake her!"

"Oh ye of little faith," He murmured, lifting the slumbering bundle into his arms. Sadie didn't stir, and James rocked her back and forth, wondering if any pup had ever looked so sweet.

Isabel huffed, but sidled closer to study the child. "You're lucky, you should never risk waking a sleeping baby – no matter how cute they are."

"But no baby has ever been this cute." James expressed, ducking his head to kiss Sadie's downy head. "I'd have to be a monster to resist her."

"Every baby is this cute when you love them." Isabel corrected him, sounding far away even though she hadn't moved an inch.

James searched her lovely features, immediately seeing the love and longing in her blue eyes. Cradling Sadie in one arm, he reached for Isabel with the other, sliding his big hand around her waist. "And you? How are you doing today, little wolf?"

"Fine." Isabel replied curtly, squirming a bit in his hold. When James continued to intently stare at her, she added. "You shouldn't look at me that way."

"Why not? I've had a bloody wretched day. All I want to do is hold my Sadie bug and look at you." He professed, his lips curling into a smirk, "Well, that's not all I want to do,

but I have a feeling it's all you'll let me get away with."

Isabel narrowed her eyes, but leaned into his warmth despite her sullen mood. "Why has your day been so hard?"

"Just pack stuff. Things I really don't want to think about right now." He revealed, dropping his head to the curve of her neck and breathing in her scent. Some of the knots in his stomach untangled as her fragrance washed over him, making his conversation with Roger feel like it was a million miles away.

"Well, if you want to think about something else," Isabel began hesitantly, sounding uncharacteristically nervous. James raised his head at the shaky tone, and Isabel's courage fled. She backed out of his hold, wringing her hands.

She'd thought a lot about the question she was about to ask, and every time she convinced herself it wasn't appropriate, her inner wolf pitched a fit. The stubborn creature insisted that, appropriate or not, it was right. The canine was certain James would agree, but Isabel wasn't sure... or perhaps she was afraid he would agree, and she wasn't sure what that would mean for them.

Throwing her doubts aside, she forced the words out, staring at her feet rather than meeting the intimidating pilot's piercing gaze. "I've decided that it's time for me to truly claim Sadie as my daughter... and I thought you might like to do the same?"

Chapter 221 – Summit begins

3rd Person

James froze, staring at Isabel in shock and amazement. “Are you serious?” He inquired, not wanting to get his hopes up in case it was all a jest, or some strange test.

Isabel only flushed, starting to backtrack. “I... well, I just thought... I mean She stammered, looking anywhere but at him. “I’m sorry, it was a silly

idea. You’re just so fond of her, I don’t know what I was think-”

“Of course I want to.” James interrupted, wanting to hold her so badly it hurt, but settling for a firm hand on her shoulder. “Goddess Isabel, I’d love nothing more.”

“Really?” Isabel squeaked, a tremulous smile stretching across her features.

“With all my heart.” James confirmed, pinning her with a fierce gaze. “But I do have to warn you.”

“About what?” She asked, going still.

“I’m not going to settle for Sadie alone.” James informed her sternly. “I want you both. I was prepared to wait -to fight for you – but you need to understand that letting me bond with her this way will change things. There will be no getting rid of me now.”

Isabel trembled slightly, peeking up at him from beneath her lashes. Her expression was somewhere between sullen and amused, “Was that ever an option?”

“No,” He chuckled, “but now that I know you realize it, I’m afraid I’m going to make things very difficult for you.”

Isabel flashed her fangs, but light sparkled in her eyes as she issued her own challenge. “Right back at you. It’s not going to be easy to win me, James.”

The soldier only grinned, at last pulling her into his arms. She didn’t come quietly, but once she was there she melted into him – a perfect fit. “Don’t I know it.”

The next morning, Cora was getting ready for her shift in the medical tent when she heard a few of the Vanaran nurses gossiping. “They’re increasing the evacuations, but I think they’re worried about more than simple detection by Emperor shit-for-brains.”

Cora smothered a snort at Damon’s unflattering nickname. She wasn’t usually one to eavesdrop, but neither did she see the harm in listening to this conversation – after all it’s not as if it was personal. Besides, as Ella’s eyes and ears in the camp, part of her job

was getting a sense for the climate among local staffers and refugees alike. The others only saw her as a medical trainee, but the Luna had realized the value of having her sister on staff here early on.

“Why do you say that?” The second nurse inquired, unpacking her own supplies.

“Because they’re not only sending guardians and enforcers this time.” The first replied, in the tone of someone quite pleased to be in the know. “My friend in aviation saw the manifests and apparently the new Moon Valley Beta is headed out on the first transport this morning.”

“Oh, the handsome one?” The second questioned, “Roger?”

Cora froze, suddenly extremely interested in the woman’s response.

“That’s right.” The first she-wolf nodded, “And with as many people as they’ve already lost, I can’t believe the Alpha would risk sending his brother without a damned good reason. Especially not with the summit kicking off later today.”

Cora dropped what she was doing, swinging her gaze to the clock mounted on the wall. It was four forty five, and if she remembered correctly, the first flights departed at five. She raced out of the tent without a second thought, knowing she was probably causing a scene, and not caring.

She darted out of the main camp and headed straight for the airfield, not thinking about what she was doing or why. She acted on pure instinct, driven forward by the relentless pounding of her heart. When Cora reached the tarmac she searched for Jame’s plane first. He was the most experienced soldier and the highest ranking pilot, so he was the most-likely candidate to ferry the pack’s Beta across the ocean.

Her eyes landed on the two familiar figures just as they left the hanger and began approaching the aircraft, their bearing tired but alert. She set off at a run, and when she was within shouting distance, she called out to Roger. He turned immediately, genuinely surprised to see the woman hurtling towards him.

He caught her by the arms before she could barrel straight into him, “Cora!” He asked urgently, “What is it, what’s wrong?!”

Unused to running for any distance, Cora bent double, trying to catch her breath. Roger leaned over her rubbing her back, “Easy now, it’s okay, you caught me. Just breathe.”

“I... you- why...” She gasped, frustrated with her inability to handle the brief exercise, “oh my god, why do people run for fun – this is the worst!”

Sensing that no one was in immediate danger, Roger relaxed slightly, taking full advantage of the opportunity to soothe her. "I've got you, just take a minute. I'm not going anywhere."

"Liar!" Cora accused breathlessly, pointing a finger at him. "You're... flying back... to the continent."

"I meant I'm not leaving right this second. James still has to get the engines warmed up. Come here," He guided her over to the rolling staircase leading up to the plane, "Sit down." He instructed, easing her down onto the steps and kneeling in front of her, "What's going on?"

"Why are you going?" Cora managed to demand, her eyes wide and worried.

"I need to see the situation on the ground. There's a lot of security concerns and I can't very well address them if I don't see them for myself." Roger replied, still not understanding her panic, "Why what's going on?"

Cora sighed in exasperation, unable to comprehend her own irrational reaction. "Nothing, I just... it's dangerous isn't it?"

Roger shook his head, preparing to tell her that he would be perfectly safe. However, before he got the chance, the pieces of this sudden puzzle clicked together in his mind. He realized that Cora was here for him, for no other reason than that she'd heard he was leaving and was frightened for his safety.

His eyes lit up, as he took her cheek in his large hand. "Cora?" He prompted slyly, "You're not worried about me, are you?"

"What?" Cora snapped, thoroughly affronted. "Of course not. I just..." She trailed off again, looking confused. The big wolf almost felt sorry for her – almost.

"Just what?" He arched his brow, "voluntarily did more cardio than you've done in a year to demand why I was leaving? Abandoned your duties to run over here, shouting my name like your life depended on it?"

"It wasn't like that." Cora replied haughtily, finally calm enough to breathe normally. She sat up and pushed his hands away, trying not to think about how nice they'd felt on her skin. "I thought maybe you two needed medical support." Roger could see her making up the words as she went, getting more firmly behind the idea as it came together in her mind. "Yeah, I thought you might be going because something had happened and emergency personnel would be helpful."

"And it didn't occur to you that we would have requested medical staff if we required

them?" Roger countered skeptically.

"What can I say, it's very early, I guess my brain isn't entirely turned on." She shrugged, digging her heels in. "so, do you need a doctor to come along? Just in case?"

Though he was enjoying her performance, the suggestion of taking Cora along for the flight aroused his wolf's protective instincts. Before he could get a handle on his inner animal, he'd growled, "Not a chance."

Cora's chocolate gaze sharpened, "Why not, if it's so safe?"

Her suspicion returned the smile to Roger's face, "You don't have anything to worry about, little one. I promise I'll come back to annoy you. If you like, I'll even stop by the medical tent as soon as we land."

Cora scowled, "Don't call me that." She shoved at his hand when he reached for her again. "I already told you, I don't care about your safety. And the last thing I need is you interrupting my work again."

"Are you sure?" Roger posed, "Maybe you should give me a goodbye kiss before we take off, just in case."

The human's lip curled, and she began putting distance between them, "I would rather kiss a rabid bat."

Roger grinned, giving chase. "Now how can you know such a thing without putting it to the test? I'll tell you what, kiss me now, and when I come back I'll bring you a bat to compare. But I'd be willing to bet my bite is the nicer of the two."

"I said no!" Cora glared, holding out an arm to keep him at bay, "there will be no kisses and no biting."

"Come on, Cora, don't knock it until you've tried it." Roger teased, still tracking her.

With an exasperated groan, Cora spun around and began stomping back to the medical tent. Roger watched her with a wide smile, but he kept his next thought to himself. I could watch her stomp away from me a thousand times, as long as she keeps coming back.

Chapter 222 – The Summit Begins

Ella

Warm hands trail over my bare skin as I come awake, tracing the curve of my belly, outlining the shape of my breasts. Sinclair's perusal is slow and steady, not meaning to arouse, but merely explore. My back is flush to his chest, and his broad shoulders offer endless support for my aching spine.

His warm voice rumbles in my ear, but I quickly realize he's not talking to me. "The cities were magnificent." He declares in a quiet, almost reverent tone. "I wish you had been able to see them, but I promise I'll take you some day – you and your Mommy. They had things I never even imagined were real: entire territories powered on Vanarium with no need for fuel, and cars that can transform into boats or aircraft in the blink of an eye."

"Your Uncle Gabriel is clever but he's a bit old fashioned too – some of his Alpha's are much more interested in showing off their innovations than celebrating their history." Sinclair continues to caress my tummy as the baby flutters in response – not understanding his father's words, but loving the sound of his voice and not wanting it to end.

I don't want Sinclair to stop either, so I pretend I'm still asleep. At the same time, my bladder is screaming for me to get up, and my rumbling stomach isn't far behind. "When you grow up we're all going to be living in a very different world," my mate continues. "It's exciting to imagine how far society and technology will have come... and daunting too. But there are some things that are truly timeless – and I'll teach you all about them. How to control your power; how to hunt and survive in every kind of climate; how to track a target and fight as both man and wolf."

Sinclair pauses thoughtfully, and for a moment I think he's onto me, but then he carries on as before. "How to trust your wolf's instincts and lead with your heart and your head as well as your strength." A gravelly note enters his deep bass, and suddenly I feel sharp fangs are scraping across the curve of my neck, "How to know when you've met your mate, and what to do with her when she makes mischief – like pretending to be asleep so she can eavesdrop on your conversations with your pup."

I gasp and giggle as his fingers begin tickling my sides, the sensations taking over me before I've finished processing his words. My eyes snap open and I try to wriggle away from the sly wolf, who grins down at me triumphantly. "Did you really think I couldn't tell, trouble?" He croons, nibbling my shoulder as his wolf's voice chants Mine in my head.

Joy blooms in my chest in response to my mate's playful mood – he so rarely gets to be silly, even though it's one of my favorite aspects of his personality. I don't want the fun to end for either of us, but the persistent pinching in my lower abdomen is only growing sharper the more I laugh.

“Dominic stop! I have to pee!” I squeal, still trying to escape his hands.

“You should have thought of that before, little wolf.” He teases, laughter vibrating in his chest. “You’ll never get away from me now!”

A tiny trickle of urine escapes me, and I start to truly fear I might wet the bed. The Nest! My wolf cries anxiously, Not my nest! It will ruin it! Sinclair senses my panic and finally lets up, helping me find my feet and sending me off to the bathroom with a playful swat on my – still sore – behind. I yelp but rush off, and when I finish my business and return, I pin my mate with my fiercest glower. “I hope you know I won’t ever forgive you if you make me sully my beautiful nest.” I growl in warning, poising my hands on my hips. “my bladder control is hanging by a thread and it’s only going to get worse as the pregnancy progresses.”

Sinclair frowns, considering the ruffled pillows and disheveled blankets – evidence of his crime, even if it was a close call. “I’m sorry baby, I wasn’t thinking about the nest.” He confesses, rising from the bed and reaching for my tightly wound body. “I got a bit carried away. I just love hearing you laugh.”

Sulking, I reluctantly allow myself to be cuddled, but I don’t relax against him until he begins purring. “Well I like laughing with you, and I liked hearing you talk to Rafe.” I pout, “it doesn’t count as eavesdropping when the person you’re talking to lives inside me, you know.”

“I know.” He croons, in a sympathetic tone which tells me he senses exactly how vulnerable I’m feeling. “Poor little mate, I wasn’t playing fair.”

“It’s okay.” I sigh, nuzzling his chest and breathing in his beloved scent. We stay like that for a long moment, simply holding one another, stealing yet another moment in the midst of the chaos ahead.

“Are you ready for today?” Sinclair asks after a while, referring to the imminent summit.

“Not really.” I confess. “I’m not sure what to expect. I remember some of the details you shared about your visits, but there were so many. Besides, the delegations are so large I’m going to need a cheat sheet just to keep them all straight.”

“Gabriel and his staff are going to be our living cheat sheets.” Sinclair shares, not sounding nearly as worried as I feel. “It’s too much for any one person to keep track of and anyway, I didn’t even make it to all the packs. Some of these meetings are going to be happening completely cold, and it’s entirely likely that the bombing undermined or altered the conversations I did have.”

“You think they’ll be less likely to help us if they think our presence here threatens them?” I guess, knowing I should start getting dressed – or at least feed myself, but not wanting to move from my mate’s embrace.

“That’s a very real possibility, and the situation with the secrecy pact isn’t helping.” He replied, sounding tense. “I’m not sure we shouldn’t have called them all to the summit cold – too much has changed since I set out on my trip.”

“As far as I’m concerned, I don’t think investing more time and effort in building relationships is ever a mistake.” I offer, kissing one of his muscular pecs. “At least they know what you stand for and how you operate, and you have a stronger sense of their characters.”

Sinclair purrs in appreciation, kissing my hair. “I just hate to think we might have wasted valuable time. It kills me how long this is taking.”

“It’s only been a month.” I remind him gently. “It seems like ages because you feel every single loss of life on your own conscience, but most wars are years in the making. You’re doing everything you can, Dominic. And your dedication is what makes you such a great leader.”

“Even if I steal long afternoons to lie in bed with my mate and pleasure her into a coma?” He jokes, nipping my earlobe.

“Even then.” I grin against his shoulder, only the smallest doubt slipping into my thoughts. “Do you regret it?”

“I agonize over every second I don’t spend on the war.” He admits, “But I know it’s necessary to keep myself going, and I also wouldn’t trade that time for anything.”

“Good.” I proclaim, squeezing him even more tightly than before. “Me neither.”

A little while later I’m standing in one of the King’s opulent sitting rooms, touching up my hair in the mirror. Cora enters and scans the room with an eagle-eyed gaze. It seems like she’s searching for something, but her face falls when she completes her study, her eyes coming to a stop on me.

“Do I look that bad?” I quip, wondering if she’s not looking for a certain handsome Beta.

She blinks and adopts a smile. “No, you look wonderful.” She expresses, gesturing to my floor length maternity dress. It’s more formal than anything I would normally wear, but I have to admit the fabric is divine and I feel free and confident in it.

Sinclair, Henry, and Gabriel enter then, and my sister swings her eyes to the new arrivals, looking hopeful once more. Again she seems disappointed, and I feel slightly giddy with the knowledge that she's definitely not as indifferent to Roger as she lets on.

"They're about half an hour out." Gabriel announces, looking around at our small group with approval. "My chief of staff assures me that everything is ready, so it's just a waiting game for now."

"But we aren't all here yet," Cora objects, blushing. "Are we?"

Sinclair exchanges a knowing look with me. "My brother will be here shortly, apparently the refugee transports just landed a little while ago."

"Has he had time to give you a report yet?" Henry inquires curiously.

I smell Roger a moment before he walks in, and I watch with avid interest as Cora jolts then turns away as the door opens, pretending to be oblivious to the man's arrival. "I'll give it now." Roger says by way of greeting. "And I'm afraid it isn't good."

"Tell us." Sinclair instructs him, extending an arm to me. I oblige, not minding the bossy summons because I know it's a sign of his worry. So I cross the floor and sink into his lap just in time for Roger to deliver the news.

"It's absolute chaos." Roger sighs, pulling out his phone and hitting a few buttons. Suddenly images appear on the television screen, and my heart plummets as I see the endless crowd of shifters swarming the transport planes. "There's too many of them, and not enough of us. Any concept of security is impossible in the current state. Getting the process organized would mean sending in troops, and I have a terrible feeling that this is exactly what Damon is waiting for."

We're still trying to grapple with the scale of the crisis when bells begin ringing through the castle, signaling the end of our discussion – no matter how urgent it remains.

The Alphas have arrived.

Chapter 223 – Welcome feast

Sinclair

The entire capital seems to have turned out to welcome the delegations from around the continent, for beyond the palace gates there is a sea of excited onlookers, clamoring to watch the parade of Alpha's approach the summit.

Gabriel and I lead our party down the palace steps to await them, and though our group is small, we're surrounded on all sides by guards and courtiers. Servants gather just out of sight, ready and waiting to rush forward and collect the traveller's bags or do their bidding.

I keep Ella tucked under my arm, watching as the first delegations begin to stream in. Though none of the visitors have done anything too extravagant, given the somber tone of the event, they've certainly gone out of their way to show off their power and wealth.

The flood is dressed to the nines, driving their most luxurious cars and flanked by their fiercest looking men. Vanarium gleams everywhere the eye can see, and I have to squint against the glare of the metal in the hot sun.

It appears they all want to show off, but their reasons are undoubtedly varied. Some of the war's opponents probably want to rub their prowess in our faces – to show us what we can't have. Others are doubtless trying to curry favor with their king, or simply win a leading role in the battles to come.

However no matter their motives, I see all eyes gravitating to Ella. They stay glued to her in a way that betrays their curiosity and admiration, and suddenly I wonder if they aren't showing off for her sake.

We greet the Alphas, their families and Betas one by one – first Gabriel, then Ella and me. They bow for us all, but none so deeply as for Ella, the one wolf among us who was not voted into power, but chosen – created by the Goddess herself.

A new hope sparks in my chest, a prayer that my mate's heritage might be enough to overcome our recent challenges. I always knew she was going to be my secret weapon – right from the very beginning – but I hadn't expected everyone else to recognize it so quickly.

The welcome process takes the better part of the afternoon, but finally every delegation is settled in their suites, and their staffs dispersed among the palace. Ella is practically sleeping on her feet by the end, leaning her slight weight into my side and resting her cheek against my chest, sweet sighs falling from her lips. I carry her inside for a brief nap before dinner, but she wakes fresh and eager to get to the feast.

It's a good thing too, because the event isn't the apolitical meet and greet we'd originally planned. Instead the Alphas dive straight into discussions of the war, and as enamored as they may have been to meet a living demigoddess, the consensus is far from supportive.

"Alpha Dominic, we were all extremely concerned when we heard of the attack on your convoy and we're beyond relieved that you're alright." The Storm Forest leader begins. I sense the 'but' coming already, though it's no surprise – I'd feared this Alpha would pose difficult. "But the fact remains the incident proved your war is already bleeding over into our territory."

"It's not my war." I correct him coldly, ignoring my food and leaning back in my chair. "It's all of ours – all shifter kind." I glance around at the others, trying to gauge their reactions and finding a room full of poker faces.

Surely you don't believe Damon will be satisfied with conquering one continent, especially not if all his subjects flee here."

"We can deal with Damon," The FrostFang leader interjects, brushing off this concern. "Or leave him for the humans to crucify."

"Dominic, we know you came to us looking to novelxo rally support, and we applaud your determination to return home and defeat the Usurper – it's what any good leader would do." The White Claw Alpha commends." However you must recognize that things have changed since the Secrecy pact broke.

"You aren't wrong when you say this war belongs to all shifters now – but it's not because of the threat Damon poses," The Black Alder leader proclaims evenly. "It's because of the human threat. Every shifter on the planet is at risk now, so we have to look beyond the tragedys in your homeland and think about the future of our entire kind."

"He's right." The Midnight Alpha adds, "A war is short sighted. Even if we win against Damon, it would only be a temporary fix, a distraction from the human problem." Ella shifts uneasily in her chair, and I can sense her displeasure with this framing. "At this point it makes more sense to brace for all shitters coming here, rather than funding a war that will only lead to more strife if you manage to win." 2

"That's ridiculous." Gabriel assets, "every shifter in the world cannot possibly be accommodated in Vanara – and even if they could, it would only be a matter of time before the humans began searching for us."

"Then let them search, they've never found us before." The Storm Forest leader scoffs.

"They've never known we existed before." The King reminds him, a warning note in his

voice.

At that point, a silken voice pipes up beside me. “Not to mention the damage which would be done to the human communities left behind.”

Every eye in the room turns to look at Ella, and Goddess love her, she stares back at them with unflinching determination. I don’t know a single she-wolf alive who could stare down this room of intimidating wolves, but Ella doesn’t even bat an eye. When no one says anything, she continues, “I’ve been amazed ever since I arrived in this land – from the freedom your people are privileged enough to enjoy, to your technologies and advancement. It’s truly remarkable, but I wonder how many of you have spent time in our homeland?” She asks, resting her hand over mine.

No one moves or speaks, and I wonder if they’re merely stunned she interrupted them, or confused by her statement. Again she forges on, not waiting for permission. “What you must understand is that our worlds are completely intertwined.

There is no separating the human and shifter economies – everything is interdependent. All the businesses, the industries and stocks – the only things which truly remain separate are the governments. Humans and wolves live side by side, even if they did not previously realize it.”

“Is there a point to this?” The Storm Forest leader inquires, earning himself a growl from my wolf. The others look chastened, but Ella only kisses my cheek, “It’s okay, my love.” She tells me, before turning back to them. “What do you imagine will happen if one third of the societies around the world suddenly disappear?”

She inquires, ‘Your territories may be hidden, but they are not self-sustaining. You rely on imports and exports from across the globe. So if every economy, if every society other than yours collapses, what do you think will happen to trade and security? Are you prepared to take in millions of new citizens, just when all the international relationships you’ve built for centuries collapse?’

Her statement is met with potent silence, and I can see the Alpha’s reflecting on the undeniable truth she speaks. It was a calculated argument, and not the one I expecte from my mate – at least not entirely.

“Well what are we supposed to do?” The Silver Dawn leader demands. ‘The humans are already talking of pre-emptive strikes.’

“From their perspective nothing is preemptive.” Ella corrects him. ‘The first blows have already been stuck – the first hundred blows even. You forget that it is not only shifters suffering at Damon’s hands. Millions of humans are being displaced and murdered – they have every right to fight back, and it’s not their fault that they have no information

about us or our perspectives to help guide them. It's ours. How are they to know we're not all bad, when everything they've seen of us has been horrific?"

'They have years of peaceful living as proof that it doesn't have to be that way.' The Wind River Alpha argues.

'That's not what it feels like to them.' Ella insists. "You've always known that both societies existed, so you can see the harmony we once struck. They are just finding out that everything they believed their entire lives was wrong, and it's happening right as the world explodes. That trauma would be enough to skew anyone's perception.

All these politics are games of guessing the intentions of others and forming misconceptions based on our own biases. So I'm telling you that your understanding of their view is wrong, we have to acknowledge and appreciate that if we have any hope of getting through this without dismantling society as we know it."

There's another pregnant pause, "So what do you suggest?" Gabriel prompts her, hiding a smile. "We've already reached out to some of their leaders, and we're waiting for a response. But I suggest that this summit should be the first of many. We need to send delegations to the humans, to show them that we are not all Damon. Hell, we ought to bring them here if they'll agree, let them see the suffering our own kind are experiencing. We have the same enemy – we need to show them we can be allies." Ella states, loudly enough for all to hear.

'That's madness,' someone mutters.

"Or genius." Another adds wryly. "Whether it's madness or genius, I guarantee it's right." Ella states confidently, offering them a Cheshire smile. "But you don't have to agree with me yet. I've got all week to wear you down."

The other Alphas exchange astonished glances, and the man beside me leans over to whisper in my ear, "Well you've certainly got a live one there.'

I chuckle, "And I've never loved her more.

Chapter 224 – Ella's Wolf Takes Over

Ella

I'm exhausted after the feast, but I know our work isn't yet complete. Roger hasn't finished his report about the refugee crisis back home and though I realize the situation is urgent, I'm not eager to discuss it. I feel like my heart and mind are maxed out on thought and emotion, so delving even deeper into these matters might just break me. Only my determination outweighs my dread, because I know I owe it to our people to bear witness to their suffering.

Sinclair is a steady presence beside me, and through our bond I feel his wolf fretting over my wellbeing. Stubborn mate, you should go up to bed. The bossy canine insists, and I see him in the shared space of our minds – nuzzling my wolf's neck and nipping her shoulder.

I want to stay with you. My wolf replies obstinately, leaning into his side and ignoring his foreboding grumbles.

Impossible thing, his wolf croons, offering me pure indulgence until a sidelong glance comes my way. You know there used to be a time when people were afraid of me.

Oh hush, people are still afraid of you. My wolf replies, circling around him and rubbing affectionately against his big body.

You're not. Sinclair growls, his wolf's dark muzzle quirking into a smile. His hawkish gaze follows my wolf as she winds around him, showing off her curves and lovely gold furr. You seem to have forgotten I'm your mate, and not your playmate. His voice is all deep foreboding, and I shiver with delight. My wolf does love it when he gets stern with us.

If it were up to me, his ominous tone and intimidating expression would be enough to still my restless energy. Unfortunately I'm worried about the meeting we're about to have, and my wolf is taking every excuse to distract us both.

I'm just happy you're home. She answers, swiping her tongue over his snout, then nudging her way under his chin.

Though we're still standing quietly side by side, I know Sinclair and I are both keeping a sharp eye on our wolves. They may not need actual space to interact, but if they don't calm down soon we're both going to end up shifting before we can get through this meeting. The next thing I know Sinclair's wolf has pounced in our shared conscience, and my gold fluffball is flat on her back, her little wolf feet dangling in the air. A deep chuckle rolls through my mind like thunder, spurring on my defiant inner animal.

She should be defeated, but my wolf only cocks her head and bats her lashes up at the lethal predator baring his fangs at her. Do you want me to be afraid? She inquires, writhing invitingly on the ground. I can run from you and hide and make a big fuss when you catch me. Flames spark in Sinclair's eyes, and I know he likes the sound of this. In fact this isn't so far from our role playing the other night, when I did all those things naked in a red cloak.

Naughty little wolf, I want you to stop flirting with me and settle so we can get through this meeting without me being forced to drag you out of here like a caveman. His wolf responds, sounding human enough that I know my mate has finally taken control of the feral creature.

And if I don't? I challenge, turning my body into his and trailing my hand up his chest, hoping the others won't see. What happens after you drag me out of here?

A true growl – not a secret rumble through our bond or some passive sound- tears from Sinclair's chest, and I know I've pushed him too far. I don't know what would happen, but I can tell you what's going to happen when we're done here and I guarantee you don't want to make things worse for yourself.

Electricity jolts in my bones, and my wolf finally relaxes, recentered by Sinclair's dominance. He eyes me knowingly as he pulls me into his lap, "come here you." He purrs, settling me on his thighs with a wolfish grin. "Enjoy sitting comfortably while you can."

I whimper softly, leaning into his chest and praying the other men didn't hear him. A hot blush burns on my cheeks as Sinclair strokes my spine, making soft rumbling sounds of contentment. Right on cue, Roger enters with James, and I think back, Thank you, reality – hoping sarcasm translates through our bond.

"Well, how was the grand feast?" James asks, sounding both genuinely interested and apprehensive.

"You'd know if you'd accepted our invitation." Sinclair replies easily, a distinct hint of amusement in his voice.

"I'm a soldier, I don't have anything to talk about with people like that." James counters, shrugging.

"What, rich people?" Roger quips, "I happen to think we're delightful."

"And politicians. They have a way of twisting the truth around until you can't even recognize it anymore. I don't like being told that things I can see with my own two eyes are wrong or don't exist, just because the reality is inconvenient." James answers

seriously, his face pulled into a deep frown.

“Not all alphas are like that.” Gabriel sighs, sounding unsurprised.

“Oh no? Then your talks went well?” James inquires archly.

“They didn’t go much of anywhere.” I confess, smiling ruefully.

“That’s not true. I think you really got through to them about the humans.” Sinclair interjects, ever my cheerleader.

“Worry for their own economies got through to them, nothing else.” I remind him coolly, not wanting to let my ego inflate too much.

“Well we still have a week left to bring them around.” Henry reminds us.” Besides, they’re visiting the camp tomorrow, and the nursery. If that doesn’t tug on their heartstrings then nothing will.

“That might be more effective if we can actually guarantee everyone entering the hidden territories are refugees.” Roger says, “What are we going to do about the evacuations? How are we going to ensure security?”

“Did you find any suspicious names on the registration list?” Sinclair questions,

“Only five single men have entered the camps since our operations began. Three were elderly, the fourth is a resistance fighter who was gravely injured in Damen’s takeover. He lost an arm and was deemed incapable of continuing as a soldier.” Roger reports, listing off the details from memory.

“And the fifth?” Sinclair presses.

“At this point we’re assuming he used a fake name to register: Drake O’Dell. No one recalled seeing or speaking with him – even the intake team. No one has clocked him since the flight disembarked. He’s not in the camp, and even the other passengers on the plane didn’t seem able to remember him.” James shares, his face drawn and pale.

“So we think this is the guy?” Gabriel assesses, looking pensive.

“Well it’s precisely the profile for which we were searching, and it’s very concerning that this person came in on our transports then disappeared completely. If our operation were larger it might be expected that we’d lose track of a few people, but everyone else is accounted for.” James confirms, still looking wretched.

“So, we don’t even know what this wolf looks like?” Sinclair inquires, his hands tightening

reflexively on my body.

“Luckily we do – we’ve taken photos of every refugee to enter the camp, so we can identify him if he returns, and we can send his photo to enforcers around Vanara – that way they can be on the lookout.” Gabriel explains, trying to sound hopeful.

“Do we have a copy?” Sinclair demands promptly.

Roger pulls a color image from his files, handing it to his brother. “Here.” He offers, “look familiar?”

Sinclair shakes his head, “If I’ve met this man I don’t remember him.

“Who was the pilot?” James asks, an odd note in his voice, “Who brought him here?”

Roger shares a grim look with his brother, answering the question without speaking a word. Neither man say a word, but the damage is done. James curses under his breath, then takes the photo, studying it fiercely. He pales, wincing as he shakes his head. “I really thought I knew everyone I brought here.”

“James, that’s too much pressure to put on anyway.” I tell him, trying and failing to scramble out of Sinclair’s lap. ‘You’ve brought thousands to safety, and as bad as things have gotten at the coast it would be impossible to notice one man among thousands.’ i

“My job is to protect our people,” James snaps back, “What if he’d decided to hijack the plane? Or bomb the camp?” No offense, Alpha, but we’re damned lucky he only went after you.”

Sinclair stiffens, and my wolf turns on the guilty pilot. I’m on my feet in an instant, moving so quickly that Sinclair can’t catch me this time. A snarl leaves my mouth before I can stop it, and then I’m stalking towards the soldier, my fangs outstretched. “What did you just say?”

Chapter 225 – Camp Visit

Ella

James is just within reach now, and my wolf can't help but think about how very biteable the soldier suddenly looks, in fact, he looks downright mouthwatering. There's a tender bit of flesh poking over the top of his belt, where muscle and fat stores combine to give the man his barrel-like build.

I could easily sink my fangs in there without inflicting permanent harm, not to mention it would hurt like hell. Then again... just in case I do want to do lasting damage... other much more vulnerable parts aren't so far away.

I've never had such bloodthirsty thoughts before, but I also don't question them – not after James suggested the attack on my mate was somehow fortuitous. "Lucky?" I repeat sharply, prowling closer now and trying to remember that Isabel would hate me if I truly hurt him.

"Lucky that he lost his Beta and closest advisors? Lucky that he almost lost his own life? Just where do you think this pack would be without him, was it luck that got all those refugees off the continent?"

"No it was me!" James argues back, his color rising. "I'm the one who's been going there every day and witnessing their tragedies. The other and pilots and I have been dealing with this madness all on our own, and now we don't only have to look out for armed attacks, but for spies too? It's too much!"

"And who gave you the planes and money to make the trips?" I counter, my hands on my hips. "Who gave you the other pilots, and a safe place to land? Who worked with Gabriel to give our people a second home here? Who arranged for the nursery where your own daughter now lives?"

I'm pacing now, and I can feel Sinclair hovering close behind me, prepared to reach out if I lost control of my wolf completely. "None of that was luck, James. That was all Dominic – all his sacrifices."

"As they should be." James hisses back. "That is the duty he bears, the oath he takes as an Alpha. What you do not understand about being a soldier is that no wolf, no matter how important, is worth the lives of innocent civilians. If it comes down to it, the Alpha should die protecting his people, rather than let them be hurt."

"Well he can't very well go back and hold up the entire front himself!" I burst, throwing my arms out in exasperation. I look to Henry, Gabriel and Roger to back me up, but they only watch in silence. "What would you have him do, James? Go home and set up his army between Damon and the refugees? So that the spies have to go through him first?"

"Maybe he should." James suggests simply, looking past me to my mate.

The taut leash I've been holding on my temper – and my wolf – snaps, and suddenly I'm lunging for the pilot with a vicious growl. A powerful arm catches me around the middle before I can sink my claws in James's handsome face, and a familiar voice purrs in my ear. "Easy now, trouble. James is right."

I swing around to look at him in outrage. "How can you say that, he—"

"Compared to what they might have attempted, we were lucky they only attacked a few high ranking wolves – wolves who were all combatants in this war, rather than civilians. I would always rather the target be me than one of my people. You know that, Ella." Sinclair replies gently. "And putting myself between Damon and the refugees isn't a new idea, baby."

"It isn't?" I inquire, my voice suddenly very small as I turn to look at him.

"No." Sinclair confirms grimly, "And we haven't done it because moving forward would take away our strategic advantage, access to weapons, and the time we need to plan a coup. But it wasn't an easy decision, Ella. I know that our people will hurt worse for the strategy, and when this is all over they'll be within their rights to hold me accountable for that choice."

"It was the only choice." I reaffirm, knowing he doesn't need my approval, but that it always helps. "You can't protect us if you aren't here. No one would begrudge you that."

You still ought to let me bite him. My wolf snipes as I glare daggers at James. No baby, no biting. Sinclair warns, pulling me close and breathing in my scent.

Come on, just a little one? I whine. He probably won't even feel it Sinclair looks as though he wants to smile. Then what would be the point? I think for a moment, adrenaline still pumping through my heart in over time. Vengeance

He chuckles deeply, kissing my neck, "I'm glad we're on the same page." Sinclair declares, and it takes me a minute to realize he's answering my last verbal statement, rather than my ferocious thoughts. "Dwelling on the past won't do us any good now. We need to figure out how to keep this from happening again."

"How, we can't exactly demand their ID papers like a commercial airline – most of them have lost everything but the clothes on their backs." James objects.

"We can send in troops, but that would be like an invitation to Damon." Gabriel adds, "Besides, I don't want the relief efforts to be militarized – it's a recipe for disaster

“Well we’ve got to do something.” Roger states soberly. “That video I showed you is nothing compared to actually being there.”

“He’s right – we can barely get the planes on the ground, let alone vet the people we’re bringing on.” James affirms, sounding pained.

“What about all the Vanaran’s technologies?” I ask, “They’ve got drones and state of the art weapons and who knows what else. Isn’t there some way we can do surveillance before our transports land?”

“The problem is that not every shifter is in our government databases, most of the IDs would be useless because most of the refugees aren’t known to us.” Sinclair explains with a heavy sigh.

“But it isn’t the unknowns we’re worried about.” I reason. “The soldiers working for Damon are all civil servants right? And if they aren’t, they’re rogues and scoundrels that have run into the law in the past. So between service and arrest records, we should be able to identify the majority of Damon’s forces with facial ID technology? Right?” I pose, wanting to make sure my logic is correct. “It wouldn’t catch everyone, but surely it’s better than nothing.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Henry praises, nodding in approval. “Could we do it without further frightening the refugees? I’d hate for them to see the drones and think they were being attacked.”

“If we tell them beforehand...” James suggests hesitantly. “We’d have to be gentle about it so they knew we aren’t suspicious of them, just people pretending to be them.”

“That’s a really difficult line to walk.” Gabriel exhales, not sounding discouraged, but daunted. “Our pilots would need to be trained for striking that kind of balance. How do you interrogate someone’s identity without accusing them of being a spy?”

I can’t withhold a small snort. The men turn to look at me with raised eyebrows, and I huff softly. “By not assuming they are spies. You assume they’re innocent and hope you’re wrong, not assume everyone is guilty and then force them to prove otherwise.” I shake my head, “honestly, treat them with dignity and respect. Only investigate if you have a reason to be nervous, and otherwise trust that the others will sniff out any traitors among them.”

“Ella has a point. As long as our enforcers remember who the true enemy is, we can get through this.” Henry agrees, “ We just have to keep our heads on straight.”

“Alright, but we still need to increase evacuations. We have confirmation that Damon

knows about our operation now. We need to either get everyone out at once, or change strategies.” Roger advises.

“I don’t think we should do anything just yet.” Sinclair sighs. “Damon will be expecting this, waiting for us to lash out in panic.”

“Maybe.” Gabriel purses his lips, “Do we even know who’s advising him anymore?”

“My sources say he’s gathered the most spineless of the continents’ elder councils – he gave them all the choice to serve him or die, so most of our elders are gone, and only the worst remain.” Sinclair explains gravely. “But they aren’t all idiots.” Silence meets this announcement, and though I might not have grown up among wolves, I can guess what a tremendous loss this is .

“And does Damon know you’re still alive?” Henry asks hopefully. “How fast is information traveling between here and home.”

“As fast as ever. By now I’m sure he’s heard.” Sinclair answers, giving me a squeeze.

“I wish there was a way for us to stay completely hidden until the time is right.” Henry groans, scrubbing a hand over his face.

“Well there’s one way.” Roger states stiffly. “We have to find Damon’s spy and get rid of them. Dominic I made it my personal mission to find the man responsible for the bomb, but I want to do more. Put me in charge of counter-intelligence. I want to root them out.”

“Roger you’re already my Beta.” Sinclair smiles, “the jobs don’t get any more important.” “This one does.” Roger confirms. “It’s my brother’s life, my new sister and nephew – it’s everything.”

Sinclair smiles. “Then the job is yours.”

Chapter 226 – Stress

Ella

After the meeting ends and Sinclair and I are safely ensconced in the privacy of our bedroom, I start to change out of my dress. No sooner is the delicate fabric pooled around my feet than my mate sidles up behind me, sliding his arms around my bare waist. “I can’t decide what made me prouder.” He rumbles in my ear, “Watching you put all those Alphas in their place about the humans, or seeing you go after James that way.”

I lean back against him with a contented sigh, turning my head so I can rest my cheek against his hard pec. “I don’t appreciate people criticizing you, when all you’ve ever done is serve and sacrifice for your people.”

He purrs, dropping his lips to the curve of my neck, “Leaders who can’t receive and accept criticism aren’t worth a damn, little wolf.”

“I don’t care.” I sniff, resting my hands over his where they rest on my belly. The baby is sleeping, but his heartbeat is strong and steady. “You don’t deserve to be treated that way.”

He chuckles, ‘Your wolf is really riled up, isn’t she?’

“Can you blame her?” I respond tartly. “After you’ve been gone for so long and then all of these cold-hearted alphas and the attacks? It would push anyone to the brink.”

Sinclair kisses his way down my shoulder while his wolf tries to appease my cranky canine in our shared mental space, lavishing her with nuzzles and kisses. “Such a feisty mate.” He praises, “Your spirit has always been one of my favorite things about you, but it’s not good for the baby for you to get so worked up. I can’t have you avenging my honor if it means putting stress on your body and the baby.”

“Well I don’t want to stress Rafe either.” I answer, feeling my mood swing abruptly, leaving me guilty and dejected. Tears well in my eyes and I stomp my foot in frustration, annoyed that I’m crying yet again and hating the Alphas and James for provoking my wolf. “It’s their fault, Damon and James and every one of those pack leaders who don’t give a damn about anyone but shifters. If they weren’t such assholes I wouldn’t be in this position.”

“I wasn’t blaming you, baby.” Sinclair croons, a steady purr vibrating against my back, “I know you can’t control being stressed. I just worry about you – now more than ever.”

“I feel so raw.” I confess, wishing I could hug him properly – without my baby bump getting in the way. “I can’t decide if I want to keep our pup safe inside me forever, or get

him out so that my weakness won't be a threat to him anymore."

Sinclair goes very still, and then I'm being turned, his strong hands guiding my body to mirror his. He takes my face in his huge hands, and I gnaw on my lower lip, not wanting to look him in the eye. I don't think I can bare to see his disappointment right now. "Look at me, little wolf." He instructs firmly, and my gaze jumps up reflexively – even if it is blurred with tears. "Now listen to me very carefully." Sinclair continues, gentle but stern. "You are not weak. You are making a miracle in the middle of the apocalypse."

I snuffle pitifully, and his purrs renew. "You need to give yourself a bit of grace, sweetheart. I know that's easier said than done, but I won't accept that kind of talk." Sinclair declares fiercely, his deep voice full of emotion. "You are amazing. You are the strongest wolf I've ever met and this pup is so lucky to have you for a mother. Not to mention that I'm the luckiest man in the world to be able to call you my mate."

"But I can't even keep our baby safe and he's not even born yet." I counter, feeling myself begin to spiral despite his love and reassurance. Once again I'm caught in a current of emotion I can't control or escape, "And you can't focus on the war because I can't cope on my own and you're always comforting or worrying about me." i

Sinclair's purr roughens, and he unleashes his enormous power, letting it wash over me. "Our baby is going to be just fine -"

"You don't know that." I argue, piping up before he can get another word in.

"Maybe not, but you'd better believe I'm going to do everything in my power to guarantee it." He proclaims. "And If you think I could cope without you, you're out of your beautiful mind."

'You made it this far without me." I remind him petulantly.

"So did you." Sinclair answers. "We got through our struggles independently, because we didn't have another choice. We didn't know what the future would hold, and we survived so we could discover it one day. But we have each other now – so why would we ever try to go it alone? Having a support system only makes you more resilient,

sweetheart. It's not something to be ashamed of." His lips caress my salty- streaked cheeks, kissing away my tears. "Would you ever be this hard on me or Cora, for letting you help us? Would you ever hold your worries for our safety against us?"

At last the combination of his tender touch, soothing sounds, steadying power and wise words take hold, and I feel the tension drain out of my body. I shake my head, my voice thick as I utter, "No."

“Of course not.” Sinclair murmurs, offering me a soft smile. “Now, on a scale of one to ten how exhausted are you?”

“Why?” I question suspiciously, recalling his sultry warnings when my wolf was flirting so outrageously before the meeting.

“Well, I thought we could have some fun.” He shrugs, a devious glint in his green eyes. “After I teach your mischievous wolf what happens when she tries to arouse me in public.”

“In that case, I’m much too tired.” I lie, even as heat pools low in my belly. Sinclair chuckles and shakes his head, flashing his sharp fangs in promise. “Nice try, baby. Have you forgotten I can sense your feelings?”

“Then why did you ask?” I exclaim indignantly.

“I thought I’d give you a chance to be good, but I should have know that was a lost cause.” He teases, pulling me in for a kiss. I start to protest but he silences me with his lips and tongue, and suddenly I can’t remember why I was so outraged a moment ago. Everything else disappears, and I melt into my mate’s arms, my heart pounding with excitement.

3rd Person

The nursery was dark by the time James made it downstairs, the pups all sleeping safely in their beds and cribs. He could hear Isabel’s heart beating slow and steady through her door, a clear sign that she was already asleep. He wanted to see her so badly it hurt, and though he’d made his intentions about her very clear, their relationship hadn’t advanced to the point where he could walk into her room and climb into bed with her.

Naturally, Sadie was also confined in Isabel’s room, and as much as James enjoyed seeing the other pups, it wasn’t the same as holding his newly bonded daughter. He was sorely tempted to barge into the room anyway – he was dead on his feet and on the verge of a mental breakdown. He hadn’t ever been so stressed in his life, and the only thing that could ease his troubles were the she-wolves on the other side of that door. James needed to see them, to hold them and be comforted by the fact that at least something was right in the world.

However as he pictured their serene faces poised in sleep, he knew he couldn’t disturb them. Instead James sunk onto the floor, deciding that listening to their sleepy sighs and gentle breathing would have to be enough. As if he’d willed it, Isabel’s heartbeat suddenly jumped and sped up as a light flicked on under the door. James’ spirits soared as the door swung open a minute later, and Isabel appeared.

“What are you doing?” She yawned, framed in the amber light of her doorway and dressed in a long silk night dress, her auburn hair loose and disheveled around her lovely face. James’ heart stopped and started again, butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

“I didn’t want to disturb you.” He stated honestly, not able to put the rest of his feelings into words.

Isabel crossed her arms over her chest. “Did you really think my wolf wouldn’t sense a strange man in here with my pups?”

James only smiled, loving her protectiveness. “I’m not strange.”

“Hmph, says the wolf sitting alone in the dark watching children sleep.” Isabel quipped, slowly approaching him. “Why are you still up?”

“We only just finished.” He explained, “and I wanted to see you and Sadie.”

Isabel narrowed her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“It was just a very long day.” He answered, scrubbing a hand over his scruffy face. “I don’t really want to talk about it just now.”

“What do you want to do?” Isabel inquired, sidling nearer with obvious interest.

James huffed out a humorless laugh. “I’d counted on cuddling Sadie, I don’t suppose she wakes up much at night?”

“Thankfully not, but what about me?” Isabel asked, sounding mildly offended that he hadn’t considered her.

“Would you let me?” James countered, arching his dark brows.

“You’ve comforted me when I’m upset more than once.” Isabel replied simply.

“And if you recall you weren’t very happy about it.” James reminded her wryly.

“But you did it anyway – because I needed it.” Isabel added, moving to stand directly in front of him and extending one graceful hand. “Let me give you the same.”

James accepted her hand without hesitation, but rather than getting to his feet, he pulled Isabel down into his lap. She yelped in surprise but soon found her entire body surrounded by warm, firm muscles. Of course, once he was touching her, it was so much harder for Isabel to resist the burly wolf. She tried not to feel the affection and

desire quickly overtaking her body, but she quickly realized she was fighting a losing battle. So just this once, she surrendered and lost herself in James' arms.

Chapter 227 – Visit to the Refugee Camp

3rd Person

The next morning Isabel woke to find James in bed beside her, fully clothed and quietly speaking to Sadie, who was snuggled between their bodies. Outside, the caretakers Isabel hired to help with the nursery were already getting the pups up and fed, so she let herself relax a while longer.

She peeked one eye open, trying not to think about how nice it would be to have James wrapped around her again. Sadie came first, of course, and she was excited to see her – but her wolf was struggling with her competing desires.

“I don’t think it’s fair for anyone to be so cute you know.” James was saying, his fingers gently tickling her tummy. She grinned and giggled, wriggling and stretching her plump arms. “And that smile! It’s criminal. Don’t you know people will eat you right up if you show them that dazzling smile? I’m tempted myself, and I love you to pieces.”

Sadie babbled happily up at him, speaking her sweet baby language as joy and amusement pulsed through their nascent bond. “Oh no!” James said with theatrical horror. “I don’t think I can resist, Sadie bug. It’s just too much to bear. I’m going to do it! I’m going to eat you up.”

He lowered his mouth to her tummy, kissing her repeatedly and making exaggerated, “nom, nom, nom,” noises. Sadie squealed happily, and Isabel couldn’t feign sleep any longer. She opened her eyes fully, and found James watching her with a look of reverence and overwhelming affection. “Good morning beautiful.”

“Good morning.” Isabel mumbled, fighting the blush working up her neck and trying to pretend her insides hadn’t just turned to mush. She diverted her eyes to the baby between them. Sadie blinked her gorgeous wide eyes at her adoptive mother, and an incandescent smile stretched over Isabel’s features. “Hello my love.” She asked, running her hand over the pup’s downy head. “How long has she been up?”

“Just a little while ago.” James smiled. “She didn’t make a sound, just lay there like a little angel.”

“That’s because she is one.” Isabel informed him earnestly, noting that Sadie was already changed and wearing a fresh onesie. She reached through her bond with the little girl, but found she wasn’t yet hungry and felt perfectly content just as she was. Appreciation for James welled in her heart, because even though she’d known he would make a loving father and strong protector, not all Alphas are so eager to do the more tedious parenting tasks. “Thank you for letting me sleep in.”

“I figured you haven’t had the chance in a while.” He replied easily, reaching out to

stroke her hair. She should have objected, but she couldn't bring herself to say the words. It felt too nice to be touched this way again, and for the first time since meeting her mate, Isabel truly considered what it might be like to make love to another man. She imagined James kissing her, stripping off her clothes and exploring her body with his hands and mouth. Much too quickly, her body began to heat up, and she forced those thoughts from her mind. The last thing she needed was for James to scent her arousal.

"When was the last time you slept in?" Isabel asked instead, genuinely concerned that he made this sacrifice for her.

"Today was sleeping in." James chuckled. "I've been doing five am flights for so long that even making it till now feels like a luxury."

Isabel turned to look at the clock, noting it was already seven. "What about today's flights?"

"Dominic ordered me to take the day off." James admitted with a frown.

"Are you worried how it will go without you?" Isabel questioned, sensing his disquiet.

He shook his head. "I know the other pilots can handle it." James paused, watching as Sadie rolled over and snuggled up to Isabel's breast with a sweet coo. "Oh I see how it is." He joked as Isabel reflexively circled her arms around the pup, cuddling her closer. "Now that Mommy is awake I might as well disappear."

"Nonsense, she loves you." Isabel smiled, trying to block out the sound of her wolf – who was currently demanding that she invite the pilot to hold them.

It turned out she didn't need to, because James's sly wolf immediately took advantage of the extra space between them. He shifted closer and looped an arm around Isabel's waist, the heat of his fingers searing the she-wolf's lower back through the thin fabric of her dress. A noticeable shiver raced down her spine, and Isabel glowered as James smirked. "Tell me why you aren't happy to have a day off." She deflected, trying to breathe in Sadie's pure scent without also taking in the soldier's enticing fragrance.

James sighed, "I know this isn't the case, but part of me worries that Dominic only gave the order because he thinks I've lost my edge." When Isabel looked confused, he continued, "Yesterday we found out that it was probably my fault that the spy who bombed his convoy got into Vanara. The working theory is that he disguised himself as a refugee and snuck onto one of my flights last week."

A beat of silence met his words, and for one horrible moment, James was terrified that Isabel would lose her interest in him. What good was he as a mate or father if he made such grave mistakes? If he couldn't detect lethal threats and endangered the very

people he was meant to keep safe?

Instead, Isabel's face transformed from pensive to horrified. "He might have killed you! Do they think Damon is going to send more assassins this way? What if the next one decides to take over the plane? What if his army lies in wait at the coast and ambushes you?" Her panic was so swift and sharp that Sadie began to squirm and fuss, feeling the unpleasant feeling filtering down through their bond.

James's wolf was conflicted. He didn't like seeing Isabel upset one bit, but he certainly enjoyed seeing her so disturbed by the thought of harm coming to him. He began to purr, stroking her spine and pressing his chest to Sadie's back so she could feel the comforting vibrations. "You're not worried about me, are you little wolf??" He asked, only slightly smug.

As he'd hoped, the jibe snapped Isabel back to her usual self, and the frightened look in her brilliant blue eyes faded. "I'm not going to let my daughter lose another parent." She proclaimed sharply, tightening her grip on Sadie and adding her own soft sounds to the soothing efforts. "So help me James, if you make her lose you too, I will never forgive you."

"I have no intention of going anywhere, Isabel." James promised, grazing his knuckles over her cheek. "If someone wants to take me from you two they're going to have one hell of a fight on their hands. I won't go down easily."

"Going down isn't an option at all." Isabel corrected him. "If they try to lay a hand on them, you rip them the shreds and get out of there. Don't go doing noble things like turning back to save babies or..." She trailed off, her voice thick with emotion. She tried to cover it by kissing Sadie's head and averting her eyes, but James saw everything. 1

"Is that really what you'd want?" James questioned, the corner of his mouth quirking as he nodded to Sadie. "For me to leave a precious pup like this sweet muffin behind, just to save my own ass?" They were so close now that he could see the moisture welling in her eyes, and the near imperceptible quiver of her plump lower lip.

"I know I don't want you to die." Isabel replied grumpily, deciding that enough was enough. She started to get out of bed, but James stopped her, keeping her pinned with one strong arm.

"Because you'd miss me?" He suggested, the spike of adrenaline in

Isabel's scent triggering his prey drive. His wolf was coming to the surface, and Isabel's was responding in kind. She was becoming more demanding, wilder and less manageable with every moment that passed.

“Because the pack needs you, and Sadie needs you.” Isabel answered fiercely. “Now let me go, I need to feed the baby and get everything ready for the visit this morning. The delegations will be here in a few hours and the nursery is always a mess after breakfast.”

“I’ll let you go.” James agreed, his eyes glowing now, “in exchange for a kiss.”

Isabel froze, looking remarkably like a startled rabbit. “Don’t be ridiculous.” She scoffs, again trying to rise.

“Come on, what’s the worst that could happen?” He tempted her. “You’ve kissed me before, and I seem to remember you enjoyed it quite a bit.”

“I was distraught.” Isabel bit back, “it’s not the same.”

“Oh I see.” James flashed his fangs, “well in that case we’ll just have to stay here all day and kiss Sadie bug instead.”

Isabel glared, and then an idea struck. “Can I decide where I kiss you?”

“Anywhere you like.” James agreed.

“Fine, then I want to kiss your hand.” She announced slyly, and James almost laughed. He knew exactly what Isabel intended, but he played along.

“Alright.” He extracted his arm from her middle, freeing her from her makeshift cage and opening the door for an escape. The moment his grip loosened on the she-wolf, she attempted to leap up with the baby. Of course, James was ready and waiting, so he jumped up with her and dragged her into his arms.

Isabel barely had time to register what had happened before James was dragging her mouth to his – one powerful hand on her nape, the other

cradling Sadie’s head between their bodies. Isabel whimpered as their lips collided, all her defenses falling away. Her wolf howled happily in her head as James expertly claimed her, extracting breathless kisses from her lips over and over again – until neither one of them could remember where they ended, and the other began.

Chapter 228 – Roger Forges a New Bond

Sinclair

Sleeping with my pregnant mate is becoming increasingly challenging as her body grows with our pup. Even though Ella takes as many naps as the pups in the nursery these days, she's still exhausted by the end of the night and I'm not faring much better amidst all this stress and activity. Still, exhaustion isn't enough to get us off to dreamland when getting Ella comfortable enough to rest is a nightly struggle.

The nest is a blessing, as the incredible abundance of pillows surrounding her on all sides can easily be shifted and fluffed to perfectly cradle her precious form – the difficulty is figuring out where I fit into the cozy retreat. Most of the time Ella just treats me as an extra large body pillow.

More than once, I've woken in the middle of the night to find her sneakily trying to rearrange my limbs to her liking. Each time I've told her to simply wake me so I can help, or to turn the light on for her late night bathroom trips so she doesn't risk running into something or tripping in the dark. Of course, my instructions go in one ear and out the other because Ella feels too guilty to willingly rob me of my sleep.

This morning is worse than most, because I have to be up at the crack of dawn despite the fact that Ella managed to completely sprawl herself over my body last night. If it wasn't for my prior engagement, it would be picture perfect: she's on her side with her arms and legs tangled around my own, her round belly resting on my torso.

Her long rose-gold hair cascades over my chest, and her heartbeat is in perfect sync with the baby's. Rafe and Ella's sweet smells overtakes my senses, and my groggy wolf sighs with utter contentment.

I mentally curse this summit. The last thing I want to do is get out of this bed, shortly followed by waking the angel on top of me. I try to extract myself as carefully as I can, rolling her small body away from me and attempting to replace my mass with pillows. I almost manage it, but every time I manage to free one limb from her clutches, she latches onto a different part of me. Eventually she stirs and I emit a hushed swear, knowing the battle is lost.

"See is not nice waking your mate." She mumbles, her words slurred with speech as she nuzzles my bare chest.

"I'm sorry baby, I have to get up." I confess, kissing her her hair. "I have to meet with Roger before today's events get started."

Ella sighs, snuggling closer, "uh-huh." She sighs, her soft breath fluttering over my skin. "Stay."

"I wish I could." I answer honestly, once more trying to pry her determined paws from my body. "I'm so sorry little wolf, but you have to let me go."

"But you're my pillow." She murmurs. Her wolf begins whining pitifully in my head, which only upsets my own wolf and sends my temper spiraling further downward.

Exhaling miserably I make a third escape attempt, to no avail. "Goddess you're like an octopus, when did you get so strong?"

Ella's eyes stay closed as a glorious smile splits her cheeks. "I'm not. You just don't have the heart to deny me." She's right, I could easily overpower her and walk away, but that is a last resort.

I finally manage to get out of bed, but I'm in a right foul mood by the time I reach my brother's suite. To make matters worse, Roger has clearly slept through his alarm. The lights are off and I can hear a persistent beeping from the direction of the bedroom. Groaning, I bang on the door with my fist, not giving a damn how boarish I'm behaving. "Wake up!"

After some grumbling and fumbling around inside, the door swings open and Roger appears. He squints at me in the low light, looking completely baffled. "What crawled up your ass?"

"Damon. This war. The bloody delegations. Take your pick." I bite back.

Roger purses his lips and nods, "Fair enough." He swings his door wide and ushers me inside, yawning and stretching. "Care to tell me why you wanted to meet at this ungodly hour."

"I don't want to meet now." I growl. "There's just no other time." As I enter I notice that my brother's once impeccable rooms now look like the scene of some natural disaster. All the furniture is broken, now neatly leaned against the walls and leaving a huge empty space in the middle of the room. And though someone has clearly been sweeping, there is still a layer of dust and sawdust on the floor. "What the hell happened to your room?"

"I lost my temper." Roger shrugs, but there's an expression I don't recognize on his face. "It didn't feel right to have Gabriel's servants to clean up after me, so I've been trying to put it to rights slowly – but there's not much time." He waves the wreckage away. "It's not important, don't worry about it."

Abruptly, I recall my brother's ferocious energy when I returned from the storm forest pack alive and well. And without asking, I know exactly what caused Roger to lose his temper. I feel a deep pang in my chest, and without thinking I pull him into my arms,

enveloping him in a bear hug. He tenses, but quickly relaxes into the embrace. It's an improvement from the hugs we've shared in the past – normally it takes him ages to accept the affection.

"Look at you, big brother." I tease in a saccharine voice, "you're learning all about feelings aren't you?"

"Oh shove off." He complains, pushing me away. "Enough of that, tell me what's going on!"

I drag one hand through my hair, "Listen Roger, obviously when a new Beta takes power under normal circumstances, there's a ceremony and celebration. I wish I could give you that, but everything is moving so fast and I need to be fully bonded to you before the summit really takes off."

Roger's lips quirk, "you're going to have me take the oath at five o'clock in the morning, without any witnesses, in a dark room when we're barely awake?"

"Can you think of a better way?" I question, hating that I can't honor him the way he deserves.

Roger laughs, and shakes his head. "Okay, how do we do this?"

I extend my fangs and raise my hand to my mouth, quickly slicing a gash in my palm. I use my left hand, because my right still bears the scar where I forged this bond with Hugo, and I can't bear to mark over it. Hot, sticky blood seeps from the wound, and I offer my bleeding paw to Roger. He follows suit, biting his own palm and letting the blood pool forth before taking my hand in his.

"We already shared blood, but the bond of an Alpha and a Beta goes beyond brotherhood." I declare, needing to make sure he's truly ready for this – to submit to me from here on out. He may have felt confident he could go through with this arrangement in the high emotions following my near death, but reality may seem colder now that the shock and grief have passed. "As my second in command, it will be your duty to support and balance my wolf. But it will also be your responsibility to carry out my orders, even when you don't agree -even when you think I'm being as dumb as a brick. You may advise, you may debate and I will always do my best to listen and understand, but at the end of the day my word is law."

"I understand, Dominic." Roger replies soberly. "I'm committed to serving you, as well as the pack."

"Thank you." I exhale, feeling that the worst is past. "You will be my right hand in all things, and the pack will rely on you as a cornerstone of our leadership. If anything

should ever happen to me, it will be your obligation to take over from me until the Alpha Council confirms your permanent role, or another Alpha steps forward.”

“Assuming we ever have an Alpha council again.” Roger quips, earning a low growl.

“These oaths weren’t made with the apocalypse in mind.” I remind him. “Do you, Roger Sinclair, vow to always put the united packs before all else? To be loyal and just in all matters, to serve me and our people until your dying day?”

“I do.” Roger confirms.

“Do you vow to govern and protect the united packs, advise and inform your Alpha and Luna to the best of your abilities, further the aims and agendas of shifter kind, and always maintain the natural laws imparted to wolves by our Goddess?” I ask, recalling these words from very long ago. Already I can feel the magic beginning to take hold, sparking through our joined blood and entering our veins.

“I do.” Roger says again.

“Do you vow to take my place as leader should I perish or be otherwise incapable of governing, and to act as a mentor and guardian for my family, if there ever comes a time that I cannot?” I continue, deciding that it may be time for a new line in this ancient oath, one to address the tumultuous future we’re facing. “And do you vow to make these same commitments to non-shifters in our territories, should our societies unite?” Roger’s eyes widen only slightly. “I do.”

“Then I shall vow to always appreciate and respect your opinions, expertise and perspective. I vow to do everything in my power to help you be successful in all things, and to honor your service and sacrifice.” I profess.”

I vow to never ask you to do anything in opposition to these same values, or to put you in a position which might risk you and your family’s health, safety and happiness. I vow to always appreciate the demands and complexities of your role, and to care for you as you care for me.”

In that moment a searing pain pierces my hand, and white light fuses our palms together. I feel as though a grenade is detonating in my chest, as if my entire being might be torn to shreds with the intensity of these strange sensations. They end just as quickly as they begin, and when the rush of magic fades, I feel a new bond taking hold in my heart.

I’ve heard my brother’s voice in my head a thousand times in our wolf forms, but this is the first time we’ve ever communicated through this kind of bond, and I feel steadier and more connected to Roger than I ever have before.

Alright brother, let's get to work.

Chapter 229 – The Summit Continues

3rd Person

Roger watched the delegations warily approach the refugee camp, unloading from an identical convoy of shiny black cars parked at the entrance of the air field. Some appeared far more curious than others, keeping their expressions open and interested, if somber. A few Alphas however, most notably the Storm Forest and Midnight leaders, appeared as though they had no intention of letting the harrowing scenes ahead sway their opinions.

Even so, the new Beta could only focus a fraction of his attention on their mindset. He was far more preoccupied ensuring the airfield and camp were as secure as possible before the visit, and his wolf was always somewhat distracted when Cora was near. He'd yet to see her today, but he knew she was somewhere in the medical tents, her faint floral scent discernible through the cool morning air.

Maybe we should go ahead of the group, Roger's wolf suggested, to make sure everything is ready and do a final threat assessment.

And flirt with a certain stubborn human, since we probably won't get another chance today? Roger replied, sorely tempted by the idea but knowing he couldn't abandon his duty for such a frivolous reason.

It's a thought. The mischievous canine answered, we haven't spoken since yesterday morning. It would be a wasted opportunity when she's clearly warming to us. The beast is whining like a pup, and I have to fight the urge to roll my eyes. There's nothing more determined or impossible than a besotted wolf. Come on, he cajoles eagerly, wagging his tail. Think of how cute she'll be, trying to act all grumpy even though we can hear heart racing.

We can't – we can't afford to get distracted. I want to see her as badly as you do, but this isn't the time. Hmph. His wolf grumbled, spoilsport.

Roger glanced at the slow moving party behind him. The Alphas and their advisors were being led into the camp by the King, Sinclair and Ella. His brother kept his mate tucked safely under one arm as they approached the airfield. The planes were due to arrive any moment, and Roger knew they were all a bit tense for the first transport conducted without James's leadership.

Sinclair scanned the open area, his sharp gaze landing on his brother. At this short distance, there was no difficulty communicating through their new bond as Alpha and Beta. All clear?

So far. The entire camp has been swept and the pilots have all signaled imminent

landing with no signs of trouble. I can either stay here to help with the disembarkment, or I can go ahead of the group with a few soldiers and act as an advance team. Roger offered, secretly hoping his brother would choose the second option.

So much for not getting distracted. His wolf scoffed.

I'm not saying it for Cora, I'm saying it because it's a valid tactical strategy and might be helpful. I'll only approach her if I have a good reason... otherwise I'll just look. Roger insisted, wondering if he was trying to convince himself or his wolf of this plan.

Look and touch?" His inner animal pleaded.

No! No touching, no scent marking, and certainly no kissing... or biting... or licking... arggggh this is useless!

What on earth is happening? Sinclair's deep and slightly amused voice drowned out Roger's tortured musings. You look as if you're short-circuiting. Have you had a stroke? He didn't need to say more. Roger could feel his left eye twitching, not to mention his hands were trapped in white knuckled fists and his jaw was clenched so tightly his fangs felt as though they might grind each other to dust.

Nothing important. We can talk about it later. Roger gritted out, What do you want me to do?

Oh, I know what this is about. Sinclair smirked, keeping his eyes on the approaching aircraft on the horizon. I meant to tell you, Cora was visibly anxious yesterday when you were late for the welcome event. She kept asking if everyone was there and didn't calm down until I explained you were back safely.

That is not the kind of information I need right now, Dominic. Roger growled.

Sinclair chuckled, Alright, I'm sorry. Stay here for now. Once the planes are down do me a favor and get eyes on all the refugees coming in. Our men are well trained, but this is James's operation and they've never flown solo before. If everything checks out then catch up with us.

Roger nodded, moving closer to their group, One more thing. Sinclair interjected, raking his cool gaze over their visitors. See if you can't get close to some of the other Betas. See if you can get a leg up on their packs ' needs and strategies, their Alphas' mindsets.

Oh so I'm a spy now? Roger inquired, not the least bit bothered.

I thought you might enjoy that role. Sinclair replied. And don't worry I'll talk you up to Cora if you're not with us when we get to her section. From what I've seen you need as

much help as you can get.

Thanks, Roger thought wryly, trying not to think about the information his brother had just shared. Cora's anxiety was further confirmation of what he already sensed, and he needed to think about how to play this moving forward. Cora was stubborn and skittish for reasons that he both understood, and couldn't know unless she told him. She was also brilliant and beautiful and stop it... Roger hissed at himself. No distractions right now.

Of course, this became much more difficult once the arriving refugees had all disembarked and Roger joined the delegations on their meet and greets through the camp. He watched the Vanaran Alphas like a hawk, trying to assess their response to the suffering shifters in the camp. Luckily they all seemed very engaged, but Roger couldn't help thinking about the welcome feast.

They had two main hurdles to overcome – the first was making the Vanarans pledge their allegiance to the cause. The second, and much more challenging task, was dealing with the fallout from the broken secrecy pack. Thus, they already cared about shifters, so seeing the refugees might help forge alliances, but it wouldn't open their eyes to the bigger picture.

Soon enough they were in the medical tents, and then she was there in front of him – even more stunning than he'd remembered. However, not everyone was so impressed. “You have a human administering medical care? You've given her access to Vanaran technologies?” The Silver Dawn Alpha was aghast to find Ella's sister actually working in this place.

“And why not?” Cora asked, before Sinclair, Ella or Gabriel could reply. “I was already working in shifter medicine back home – at the highest level. My expertise is equal to that of any continental physician, so why shouldn't I continue practicing here?”

The Storm Forest Alpha shook his head. He hadn't been thrilled to learn Gabriel had allowed a human over their borders in the first place, and this was clearly a step too far. “Alpha what is the meaning of this?” He asked, the formal address not doing a damn thing to soften his sharp tone.

“If Sinclair's Luna wants to keep a human orphan as a pet that's one thing but this is proprietary technology, you can't just-”

That was a mistake. No sooner had the words left his mouth that both Ella and Roger surged forward with steam pouring from their ears, while Cora stood frozen in shock. Only the dual force of two terrifying snarls prevented the situation from coming to blows. Sinclair and Gabriel unleashed their power on the room, and everyone else winced in response.

“That was out of line.” Gabriel growled fiercely. “Do not forget you are a guest here, Kieran. You forget our origins – we are not alike in all ways, but the Goddess created us equal.”

“If that were true she wouldn’t have made the humans so weak and backwards.” The Alpha, Kieran argued. Roger scented salt, and was horrified to realize Cora was on the verge of tears.

“I have news for you,” Cora’s soft voice sounded behind them, and Roger was furious to see she was shaking. He moved beside her, and his wolf puffed up with pride when the scent of her fear faded in response to his nearness.

“Humans might not be as strong, fast or advanced as shifters, but that doesn’t mean we have no knowledge to contribute. You may think we’re brainless and backwards, but I’ve made scientific discoveries unknown to shifters and published groundbreaking research in top peer-reviewed shifter journals.

I have the intelligence and experience to help both of our kinds advance, and your prejudice – your exclusion – only holds you back. However far ahead of us Vanara is now, it would probably have an even larger lead if you considered perspectives and experiences other than your own.”

“Well-said.” The Black Alder Alpha, Callahan praised. “Get your head out of your ass, Kieran.”

Ella was trying to go to her sister, but Sinclair still seemed to fear she might attack the Storm Forest leader. He was probably right too, because her ravishing features were twisted with rage and she was wriggling against him like a fish out of water. Sinclair growled low and deep, combining the sound with a purr, and Ella calmed enough to draw in a few deep breaths.

“You should be ashamed of yourselves.” She finally hissed. “And I don’t only mean you, Alpha Kieran. I know he’s only saying what some of you are too cowardly to speak aloud. We called this summit to generate collective action against a dire threat facing us all.

As we already agreed, this war is not only Damon’s, it is not only shifters’, and Vanara can no longer escape the fallout by turning a blind eye the way you have been doing for so many centuries. Change has come and you cannot pretend otherwise.

You call yourself Alphas, but you sound like nothing but spoiled pups who don’t want to share their toys. Mark my words, if you keep up these racist, isolationist attitudes, you will destroy the way of life you so love, and cost the world dearly.”

As she spoke, Roger noticed that Ella truly seemed to be glowing. Not in the way pregnant women are supposed to, but in the literal sense, wherein radiant light shimmered around the Luna, as if she was lit up from within. Not only that, but her words carried a weight unlike anything Roger had ever felt – stronger even than Sinclair and Gabriel's devastating power.

The chastised Alpha's hung their heads and shuffled their feet, but a few looked as confused as Roger felt. They exchanged curious glances, but Sinclair only kissed his mate's soft cheek, and guided the group forward.

As the others moved on, Roger stayed behind with Cora. He didn't bother getting permission from Dominic, because not even an order from his Alpha could tear him away from her right now. "You were brilliant." He murmured gently. "Are you okay?" "No." Cora wouldn't look at him, "I'm not." i

Chapter 230 – Not Okay

3rd Person

Cora's eyes followed her sister's retreating back as the delegation exited. Ella kept looking back over her shoulder, concern and apology clear on her beautiful face. It was clear she wanted to stay, to talk about what had just happened and offer comfort, but her responsibility was to remain with the group. She mouthed "I love you" just before disappearing around the corner, but Cora could only manage a tremulous smile in response, 1

She wrapped her arms protectively around herself, all too aware of Roger's presence behind her. He was so close Cora could feel the heat radiating off his powerful form in waves, and it was all too tempting to imagine his arms around her. She didn't know why she'd admitted her hurt feelings to him, but she suspected it was the same reason she found his proximity so comforting. "You should go ahead," She tried to say, "they must need you."

"I'm not leaving you like this." Roger answered firmly, shifting close enough that Cora's shoulder blades brushed against his chest.

"Well I have work to do." Cora answered hoarsely, trying to pull away.

A heavily corded arm snaked around Cora's middle before she could take a single step. "Talk to me." Roger encouraged in a tender purr. He pulled her back against him completely, and Cora could see his handsome face in her periphery, watching her intently. "You're clearly upset, little one."

Cora was desperately trying to ignore the sensation of having the wolf wrapped around her like a security blanket, and she hated the way his nickname played on her psyche. Next to tiny Ella, Cora had always felt a bit gangly and ungainly, even though she was a perfectly average height and weight. She'd never been considered "little" compared to her sister, but she certainly was next to most wolves. It was often intimidating, but with Roger? She secretly loved how small and safe it made her feel. "I already have a support system." She told him dismissively, but her voice shook and her lower lip quivered dangerously. "I don't need you."

"Maybe not, but I'm here and I care." He answered gently, cupping her cheek in his free hand and turning her face towards him. It was an odd angle: at once sideways, backwards and upwards; but it was undoubtedly effective. The wolf's dark eyes were boring into her own from only a few inches away, and Cora felt as though he was looking straight through her. "Tell me how to make it better, Cora."

He couldn't have predicted the effect these simple words would have on the human, but the next thing he knew tears were spilling from her lashes. Heart-wrenchingly vulnerable,

Cora admitted. "I don't know. I don't know what I need right now."

Roger tsked, and turned her to face him. "That's okay." He assured her. "Because, I do." Wrapping Cora in a proper hug, he tucked her tear-stained face against the curve of his neck. He stroked her spine and began to purr, pressing soft kisses to her hair. Cora broke the moment his purrs began, clinging to Roger and sobbing into his collar. "That's it, sweetheart." Roger encouraged. "Just let it all out." He swayed softly from side to side, and though his wolf was focused entirely on soothing the devastated bundle, his own thoughts were much darker.

Roger was already plotting ways he could take revenge on Kieran for his cruelty. It was better to do so now, while his wolf was distracted. As soon as the irate beast was no longer occupied with Cora, he was going to be so aggressive and bloodthirsty that it would take all of the Beta's strength not to go rip the other wolf to shreds – which would hardly help their diplomatic mission. He needed to decide an appropriate revenge now, while he was still able to think logically. novelxo.com fast update

"I'm s-s-sorry." Cora wept, her words muffled against his shoulder. "I d- don't kn-know why I'm being such a b-baby."

"Don't you ever apologize for crying." Roger scolded, holding her just a bit tighter. "You have every reason to be upset. That mongrel was unconscionably cruel to you, and trust me, he's going to pay."

"He was r-right." Cora cried. "As far as shifters are c-concerned I'm n- nothing more than a pet. I w-wouldn't even b-be here if it wasn't for Ella."

A growl broke through Roger's purrs. "He wasn't right and if you ever suggest such a thing again, I swear to the Goddess I will put you right over my knee."

Cora shuddered reflexively, her pulse speeding up. Though she did her best to sound affronted, she couldn't completely hide the curiosity in her voice. "You can't do that."

"Watch me." Roger rumbled in her ear, sending a second shiver down her spine. His wolf howled in triumph, loving how responsive the lovely woman was proving to be. Holding Cora felt so impossibly right, and she clearly responded to his dominance. "He wasn't right. No one thinks of you that way, Cora. Kieran is a vulgar little maggot with no redeeming characteristics. Don't give his opinion a second thought."

"You don't really believe he was the only one who felt that way do you?" Cora inquired. "The others might not have jumped on board, but they didn't object either." She shook her head, frustration taking hold now that the worst had passed. "I hate the way I always freeze up that way! Why can't I break myself of that? I'm not a little girl anymore."

'You didn't freeze, you spoke up for yourself beautifully.' Roger argued.

'That's not what it felt like.' Cora confessed. 'I felt like a mouse standing up to a lion. Ella and Gabriel were the ones who actually put an end to the matter. And I just stood there and let them defend me, I probably wouldn't have been able to say what I did if...' She trailed off, her cheeks suddenly going pink.

'If what?' Roger asked, his instincts alerting him to her sudden spike of nerves.

It took Cora a long moment to answer, and when she did her voice was barely audible. 'If I'd been alone, if I hadn't had... all of you... beside me.' Her phrasing was stilted and uncomfortable, and Roger immediately understood that she'd been about to say: 'if you hadn't been beside me.' Now she was trying to cover it by making it about the group.

'I see.' Roger said, smiling to himself and breathing in her scent. 'And is there a reason you think you should have to go it all alone?'

'Because I never have before.' Cora explained, sniffing. Her tears had slowed but she didn't make any attempt to leave Roger's arms. Instead she leaned into him and closed her eyes. 'I know I don't have to be an island – I know everyone needs help sometimes. But just once in my life, I'd like to know I'm capable of saving myself.'

'So why do you think you freeze up?' Roger inquired, still purring.

'I know why.' Cora shared sorrowfully, 'because I'm afraid that if I do or say the wrong thing, if I react at all, I might provoke an even worse attack... it's a survival strategy I learned in the orphanage.'

Roger couldn't hold back his growl, but Cora was surprised to find she didn't mind. Growls from Roger never felt threatening, only . 'Well maybe we can work on that together. I could teach you how to fight, or we could start running together – so you have a flight option as well.' He teased, remembering how badly she'd coped with a short job the day before.

'No running.' Cora grumbled sulkily, earning a chuckle from Roger. The sound filled Cora with warmth, and she found herself smiling too.

'There now,' Roger praised, petting her hair, 'Goddess you have a beautiful smile.'

His compliment jerked Cora abruptly back to reality, and she realized just how completely she'd dropped her guard. A flash of panic infiltrated her senses, and she desperately tried to regain control of her senses.

Attempting to backtrack, she said, 'Thank you for comforting me, but I should get to

work, and you should catch up to the group.”

‘That might be difficult if you don’t let me go, little one.’ Roger teased, and Cora realized he was right. Her arms were still locked around his middle, and though she tried to convince her hands to release him, they would not obey. Mildly alarmed, she reflexively looked up at Roger for help, and found his face mere inches from her own. She gasped with surprise, her heart pounding even harder when she saw the wolf’s hungry expression. His eyes drifted to her full mouth, and for a moment Cora was certain he was about to kiss her. Worse, she realized she wanted him to do so more than anything – and that was truly terrifying.

Something flashed in his glowing gaze, and just when Cora thought he was about to close the final distance, he released her. “I’ll let you off just this once, Cora.” Roger promised, stroking her cheek. “Because you’ve been through a lot today, and I know you’re confused. But be warned, the next time I get you in my arms, I’m not letting go.”

Cora gulped with trepidation. Oh God, she thought as the butterflies in her stomach went into overdrive, I’m in big trouble.

Chapter 231 – Revenge

Ella

At Dinner that night, I finally get the chance to check in on my sister. “How are you doing?” I ask, giving her a one-armed squeeze.

“I’m okay.” She says, and I’m surprised to see she’s telling the truth. “How did the rest of the visit go?”

“It was good.” I reveal, not really ready to change the subject. I feel eyes on us, and look up to find Roger watching our exchange. What’s more, I realize Cora is staring right back at him, rather than looking at me. Suddenly I understand why she isn’t more upset – I don’t know what Roger did or said to her after we left, but he clearly worked his magic. “I think we made some progress. More importantly, we finally received a response from one of the human governments we reached out to last week – saying they were open to a meeting – so it seems like we might be gaining some traction.”

“But didn’t you reach out to a lot of human leaders?” Cora asks, genuinely intrigued. “Just one isn’t a very good rate of return.”

“One so far.” I correct her, hoping that I’m right. Vanara is so far away and these matters so complicated that we always expected any response to take a great deal of time. The humans are undoubtedly gathering their entire parliaments to consider our offer, and political debates are rarely fast. “Besides, even if no one else responds, if we can bring one government on board, then they could become a link to others – vouch for us.”

“That’s great.” Cora smiles, lighting up a bit. “What did the other Alphas think of that?”

“So far everyone but Kieran is playing their cards close to their chests – not that I blame them. Still, I think the camp visit did what we intended. Hearing about a crisis like this is nothing compared to seeing it with your own eyes.” I want to tell her about the way some of these puffed-up alpha males had dissolved to tears in the nursery, but unfortunately they’re all in hearing range. Instead I say, “Roger even showed them the video of the coast and offered to arrange a visit there as well.”

Cora blinked, jerking her eyes back to Roger, “But surely that’s not safe.”

“We’re deploying the first of the security drones tonight, and Dominic is pulling his continental spies and a few resistance forces back to the coast to shield the refugees – now it’s obvious Damon knows their location.” I reveal, “for now it’s the best we can do, and so far Damon’s focus isn’t on us. He’s too busy trying to remain in control of the territories he stole and from all appearances, it’s not going well for him.” 1

“I don’t understand.” Cora blinks, returning her gaze to me. “I thought the takeover was

complete.”

‘That was before the secrecy pact broke. Now he’s fighting the human armies and resistance forces have been springing up everywhere.

Apparently his initial success was short-lived. He’s employed thousands of rogues which he cannot control, and the more shifters he targets, the more enemies he makes. We’ve even got some rogue-led militia’s now.”

“Really? But... why am I only just hearing about this?” Cora asked, looking slightly affronted.

“Don’t worry, I’m in the same boat,” I relate. “These bossy wolves aren’t great about sharing information. We’re all so busy with our own projects and tasks that it’s easy to lose track.” In truth, between planning the summit, my hypnosis, work with the refugees, bed rest and Sinclair’s neardeath, I almost forgot about tracking events on the continent. It wasn’t

until my mate filled me in that I realized just how much I’d been missing.

“Well I’m glad to hear it – are the delegations going to go to the coast?” Cora questions.

“It’s not clear yet,” I answer, which isn’t entirely accurate. It was obvious the chickens hadn’t wanted to take the risk, but I won’t be saying that aloud either. “Anyway, we can talk more later, I just wanted to check on you.”

“Wait,” Cora catches my arm before I’ve even moved. She glances around at her neighbors to make sure they aren’t paying attention. “Do you... I mean ... Ella, when all that happened – earlier you were kind of glowing.” She whispers, “Did you realize?”

I purse my lips, “Later.” This is the precise word Sinclair had used when Henry and Gabriel brought up the strange phenomenon – which I had been completely unaware of at the time. It wasn’t until they mentioned it that I even knew it happened, and I don’t know how I did it. Still, Sinclair hadn’t wanted to discuss it in front of the delegations.

I return to my seat, and Sinclair promptly slides his arm around me. How is she? He asks through our bond.

Like you couldn’t hear. I joke, arching my brow.

It’s still polite to ask. He replies, nabbing my hand and bringing it to his lips. The dinner continues without incident, and eventually I tell Sinclair that I’m going to go up to our suite a bit early. Of course, this isn’t what I actually want to do. Instead I head for Roger’s rooms. He left dinner a little while ago, and I have the sneaking suspicion that

he and I are on the same page. When he opens the door, he only smiles, "I had a feeling I might be seeing you."

I walk in without hesitation, "so what are we going to do to that fuck pig?"

"Well, whatever it is, it needs to be something Kieran can't tie back to us. As much as I want to teach him a lesson, if he knows why he's being punished, he might go after Cora." Roger replies, needing no further explanation. "We'll have to keep our distance."

"What does he hate? Other than humans, I mean." I ask, though I realize my brother-in-law knows the wolf barely better than I do.

"Well, I imagine a hyper-masculine ass like that wouldn't appreciate being made to look like a little girl. We could turn all his clothing pink? We would only need to go down to the laundry and slip some dye into the wash." Roger suggests, a devious glint in his eye.

"Oh I like that." I agree. "But I don't want to get any of the castle servants in trouble, and I can tell he'd demand their heads on the platter." I pause, "In fact, I think that we need to keep this out of the palace entirely. If we humiliate him while he's here, it could undermine the summit and our alliance. It would be best if we can hit him on his home turf." I wrack my brains, and after a moment a lightbulb flicks on with a brilliant idea.

"What are you thinking?" Roger questions, easily reading my beaming grin.

"Well obviously the ignorant bastard needs some education and guidance on how not to be a world class prick. So I think we should start sending him some literature and self-help guides. They can be mailed directly to his own mansion in the Storm Forest capital, and we can even space out the deliveries so that it starts small, but over time it will build up into a

veritable library. It would certainly be easy enough to place the orders and conceal our identities so he doesn't know who's sending them." I explain, getting more and more excited about this idea by the minute. "We can even keep it on the theme of things that would completely emasculate the little weasel."

"I'm not sure I follow." Roger confesses, his brow crinkling in confusion.

"Well, just picture it," I instruct, fighting back the urge to giggle. "When Kieran returns home from his trip and starts going through the correspondence and packages that arrived while he was away, imagine how surprised and confused he'll be when he finds an advice book about living with a micro-penis; brochures about resisting the urge to cross-dress; and how-to-guides for fixing impotence." I paint the scene for us both, watching as Roger's face lights up with delight. "He'll try calling the companies which sent the books to find out who purchased them, only to find out that his own name is on

the buyer accounts.”

“He’ll be baffled and angry, and of course he’ll throw it all away – but the outrage will pass after a week or so. That’s when the next set of packages will arrive.” I continue, becoming more animated by the minute. “More selfhelp books about overcoming the things he would consider most humiliating, in conjunction with supplies to help him improve. Adult bedwetting literature with boxes of diapers; books on how to pleasure your unsatisfied lover along with penis enhancement pills; feminization porn along with frilly dresses and sex toys.

“You’re a bloody genius.” Roger praises, laughing out loud. “And the best part is that you know he’s not even going to be the one opening the boxes. His servants will deliver everything to him unwrapped. Before long rumors about his embarrassing problems will be all over the pack.”

“Exactly.” I giggle, more than a little proud of myself.

Just like that we’re off to the races, beginning to make lists and search materials online. We make the final arrangements for the first shipment and agree to meet again, before I finally sneak back to my own room. I’m so pleased with our scheme, and I’m still smiling when I walk into the suite.

“Hello mate.” Sinclair’s deep voice sends me leaping into the air before the door can even close. “And just where have you been?”

Chapter 232 – Power

Ella

I clutch my belly in shock, whirling around to locate Sinclair. He's leaning in the doorway of our bedroom, his powerful arms crossed over his chest. Sinclair's glowing green eyes pierce straight through me, a foreboding expression on his handsome face as he waits for my answer.

"Nowhere." I squeak, too surprised to think clearly.

Sinclair rumbles wordlessly and prowls forward, catching my nape in his strong hand. "You told me you were coming back here after dinner, but you were clearly somewhere else, trouble. The question is whether you meant to come back and got sidetracked, or if you lied to me?"

He tilts my head back so I'm forced to look up at him, and though he's wearing his most intimidating expression, my inner wolf only swoons. She flops onto her back and rubs herself against the ground, attempting to entice her mate. I can feel Sinclair's wolf fighting the urge to give in, reasserting his disapproval through our bond. The massive creature towers above my wolf in our minds' eye, his canine features hungry, fierce and utterly irresistible.

Sinclair's free hand travels across my waist and settles over my navel. The baby kicks in excitement, sharing the elated emotions and silliness he'd been feeling through our bond when I was scheming with Roger. For a split second, I think Sinclair might be fighting a smile, "Have you been making mischief, little wolf."

"Of course not." I promise, sliding my arms around his neck and rising onto my tip toes for a kiss, "I wouldn't even know how."

Sinclair chuckles darkly, claiming my lips for an extended interlude that sparks fire in my veins. "Don't make me ask Philippe where you've been, little wolf." He warns when we part, "it will only make things worse."

"I just went to see Roger." I shrug, batting my lashes and trying to look innocent, "I'm sorry if I worried you."

"Thank you. But you didn't answer my question, Ella." Sinclair responds, running his palm over the curve of my bottom and squeezing, hitching me closer.

I gnaw on my lower lip. "Well I was planning on coming straight here... after I stopped to talk to him."

"Uh-huh." Sinclair rumbles, dropping his head to the curve of my neck and brushing his

fangs back and forth over my mating mark. He pauses to nibble the special spot, turning my insides to liquid. “And what business did you have with Roger that was so important that you felt it warranted lying to your mate?”

“It wasn’t really a lie.” I insist, earning myself a scolding growl. I give him a beseeching look as he raises his head again, already knowing I’m fighting a losing battle, “just an omission.” Sinclair arches a devastatingly dubious brow, and I sigh. “Fine, we wanted to make Kieran pay for being such a jerk to Cora. It was our fight – not yours.”

For the first time, Sinclair looks genuinely wary, “Ella, what did you do?”

Staring at my feet – or more accurately, staring at my baby bump, which now completely obscures my feet – I tell him the details of our plan, wondering just how angry he’s going to be. When I finish explaining the plot, I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, only to find him beaming down at me. He cups my cheek in his hand and, feeling emboldened, I offer him a shy smile. “You are the sweetest, most diabolical little imp I’ve ever met.” Sinclair announces, laughing heartily. “He’s going to lose his Goddess -damned mind.”

Now I can’t hold back a grin, “it’s good isn’t it?”

“It’s brilliant, but you’re still a very bad girl for going behind my back.” Despite his words, his tone is pure affection. “I was worried when you weren’t here, and besides your fights are my fights too now. That’s how this works.”

I nod, “I’m sorry, I should have told you.”

‘Yes you should have.’ He confirms, scooping me up into his arms. “And we’ll talk more about that later, but for now I’m more concerned about the power you tapped into earlier.”

‘You mean the glowing?’ I guess, not really wanting to discuss this when we’re finally alone and his kisses have left me feeling more than a little hot and bothered. “Wouldn’t you rather do something else?” I lean forward to kiss my way up his jaw, catching his earlobe between my teeth and nipping lightly, “Something that doesn’t require any talking at all?”

Sinclair growls with longing, but he holds firm. “We have plenty of time for that, trouble.” He answers, settling on the couch with me in his lap. ‘This is too important to put off. I’ve never seen anything like it.’ He shares, caressing my belly.

“Do you think everyone noticed?” I ask, leaning my head against his shoulder. “I mean it only happened for a second, right?”

Sinclair chuckles, cuddling me closer. ‘Yes baby, I’m afraid they would have to have

been blind not to.” He explains, “It wasn’t just glowing. When you spoke it was like... I don’t know, the only thing I can compare it to is casting a spell.”

“What do you mean?” I inquire, not sure I like the sounds of this.

“I mean you captivated the entire room so completely that we all forgot everything else. When you spoke, nothing else existed. Now,” He flashed a sultry smile, ‘That might be business as usual for me, but it isn’t for other wolves – especially not Alpha’s of this caliber. Your words weren’t just persuasive, it felt as if you were rewriting my personal thoughts. That feeling faded as soon as you calmed down but it was... well, astonishing doesn’t seem a strong enough word.”

“But how could I do something like that, without even realizing I was doing it?” I frown, feeling more than a little overwhelmed.

Sinclair thinks for a moment, ‘Your wolf was bound for so long that you never got a chance to learn how to control your power like most shifters do. And when we met and she started to come out, it was a little like this too, remember?’ He prompts, kissing my hair. “We kept seeing flashes of your true nature – flashes of the alpha spirit inside you. The power would flare up and recede so quickly it was easy to mistake it for the baby.”

“And you think the same thing is happening now that my wolf is free? The power is there somewhere but I don’t know how to use it, so it’s just bursting out when my emotions get high?” I clarify, not sure how I feel about this at all.

‘That would be my guess.” Sinclair confirms.

“But where is it coming from – I’ve never heard of wolves casting spells or anything like what you’re describing. Not that I’m an expert but still.” I ramble, feeling more confused by the minute.

Sinclair begins to purr, obviously sensing my unease. “But you’re not just any wolf, Ella. The Goddess’s bloodline runs in your veins. We may not know how much of herself she gave to you, or what kind of magics that power imparts – but I have to think that’s the reason this is happening.”

I clamp my eyes shut, I’d been afraid he’d say that. “Do you think it will hurt us with the other Alphas – like they might feel tricked or manipulated?” I wonder aloud.

“On the contrary, I think it will help us. It’s one thing to reject me – and another entirely to reject the Goddess’s own daughter.” He reasons. “Even so, we need to find out what else you’re capable of – we need to learn about your power and find you a teacher to help you control it.” Sinclair declares, “As soon as the summit concludes, we can restart your hypnosis sessions – and this time I’ll be by your side.”

“But Dominic... we don’t have any idea what other memories I might have suppressed, or if there are any at all.” I object, staring at my lap. I’ve been waiting for the right time to bring this up, and it seems fate has given me the perfect opportunity – through necessity if not grace. “The only way hypnosis is going to answer these questions is if those priests or the Goddess herself came back and taught me about my power – and they certainly can’t have trained me because my wolf was bound before my magic even manifested.”

“Well, we won’t know unless we try.” Sinclair sighs, brushing my hair back from my face. “If hypnosis doesn’t hold any more answers we’ll find another way. But I promise we’ll figure this out, Sweetheart.”

Taking a deep breath, I sit up, moving to straddle his lap. Sinclair’s big hands settle on my hips as he waits for me to work up my courage. When I finally do, I say, “I think there may be another option – but you aren’t going to like it.” I reveal, watching him closely. “Dominic, I think I have to find my mother.

Chapter 233 – Maternal Quest

Ella

Sinclair's face immediately closes off, "Baby we talked about this." He rumbles, sounding unhappy but not angry.

"We started to," I agree, remembering that last painful conversation. "And then the bomb went off and everything went crazy."

"Ella, I know how badly you want to meet her. And I would love nothing more for us to be free to go searching right this minute – but it's not the time. There's too much going on." Sinclair proclaims, repeating much of the same sentiments he had when we first discussed this matter.

"But this isn't just about finding her because I want to meet her." I correct him. "You told me yourself that after Xavier died, Queen Reina left Moon Valley and became a devotee of the Goddess. That can't be a

coincidence." I insist, silently begging him not to shut this possibility down without hearing me out first. "My mother met the Goddess, she spoke to her. Whatever they discussed, it had to have been far more substantive than the fairytale version the Goddess told me as a pup. Even if that's all she knows – she still has answers we don't."

Sinclair doesn't reply, but I can see the gears working in his head, his thoughts racing a thousand miles a minute. Taking advantage of his contemplative mood, I forge ahead, "But what if that's not all? What if she's been serving the Goddess these last five years learning the secrets of my blood so she'll be ready when I come? What if she knows how to get in direct contact with the Goddess, and can help me do the same? It's obvious that the Goddess's priests and devotees have powers and knowledge we don't – far more than any elder council. If anyone can help us, surely it's her."

All of a sudden I feel a violent burst of defiance from Sinclair's wolf, the beast lashing out against the man. It explodes through our bond in a vicious haze of passion and protectiveness, rage and refusal, determination and fear. Sinclair clamps his eyes shut with the effort of getting the animal under control, and his fingers dig into my hips with unexpected force. Understanding sinks in when he slowly drops his head back against the sofa, emitting a very soft, drawn out, "fuuucckk."

My heart leaps in my chest. "I'm right, aren't I?" I exclaim excitedly, bouncing a little in his lap. "I'm right?"

Sinclair snarls, and perhaps for the first time in our entire relationship, he sets me away from him. One moment I'm straddling his thighs with my swollen belly pressed flush to his abs, and the next I'm alone on the couch while my mate paces back and forth across

the room, overflowing with feral energy. I watch him warily, feeling torn. I'm desperate to find my mother, but the last thing I want is to be away from my mate, especially as the war escalates and my due date nears. I'm sure he feels exactly the same way.

"Dominic?" I ask in a small voice, not sure what to do to help calm him.

"Yes, you're right!" He snaps, even though I hadn't planned on repeating my earlier question. "I swear, I could strangle the Goddess for doing this to us. If she wanted to create a mortal child she should have stayed with you and raised you and been a real fucking parent. She never should have torn you from Reina and Xavier, sacrificed you to be abused by the humans!" His thundering growls have evolved into a full-on roar, and his power spills out of him like a wild thing – ferocious and indomitable. "What kind of a god abandons their most precious miracle? What kind of mother leaves her children helpless?"

I want to get up and go to him, but I can tell he needs his space at the moment. He needs to get all of his fury out into the open – especially if I want him to agree to this. Even so, I feel the strangest compunction to defend my celestial mother, "In my memory, she said that I had to go through all that, so that I could know what it was to be human." I remind him.

Sinclair whirls around, "that's bullshit. You could have been raised by Damon himself and still turned out the sweetest creature to ever walk the earth!"

"I don't think that's true." I counter gently, "that's not how people work."

"I don't care!" He grumbles viciously. "I will never, never forgive her for what she put you through!"

At this point, I do stand and close the distance between us. I reach up and place my small hands on either side of his scruffy jaw, forcing him to look down at me – even though he clearly doesn't want to. He grimaces and looks anywhere but at me. I patiently wait, and he eventually concedes, his green eyes shining. I tilt my head to the side, letting him feel all my love through our bond. "You do know, that if she hadn't done all that – you and I would never have met."

Sinclair softens slightly, searching my face with his ravenous gaze. His arms reflexively wrap around my body, and he lowers his forehead to mine. There's still so much turmoil swirling through his consciousness, and the stubborn man doesn't want to give in. "If the cost of giving you the life you deserve was living without you, I would have gladly done it."

"Then I'm glad it wasn't up to you, because I wouldn't." I profess fervently. "I wouldn't trade you and Rafe for anything in the whole world, and it frankly infuriates me that you

would even suggest such a thing,” I continue with a scowl. “I am the woman I am today because of everything I survived and overcame. I’m not saying I like it, or that I wouldn’t spare myself of the pain if I could. But if it hadn’t happened we wouldn’t be here now. I wouldn’t have the love and joy of our family, and more importantly, our people would pay the price.”

“I don’t care.” He says again, wearing an expression suspiciously close to a pout. “You’re more important.” I realize I’m talking to his wolf now, rather than the logical man who puts duty above all else.

“You don’t really believe that.” I respond with a sad smile, ‘This was all set in motion so that the God of Darkness’s schemes on earth wouldn’t result in the destruction of shifters and humans alike. You, more than anyone, believe the future of our world is worth any price.”

“Not you.” He digs his heels in, clutching at me with newfound vigor, his voice hoarse with emotion. “Never you.”

“Exactly, and if it wasn’t for this war – I never would have been born.” I state simply, though the gravity of this fact staggers me. I hadn’t considered this particular bit of logic before, and though my brain wants to freak out in existential angst, I know I have to keep it together for my spiraling mate. “Don’t you prefer having me in the world and a bit scarred, than not having me in the world at all?”

“That isn’t fair.” He snaps petulantly, glaring at me even as his hands tighten on my small body.

“Maybe not, but it’s true.” I answer wryly, running my thumbs over his cheeks. “It will be okay, Dominic.” I croon, leaning into him for a hug.

“I can’t let you go, Ella.” He mumbles against the curve of my neck. I feel his angry tears on my skin, and I know that the decision has already been made, despite his continued denial. “I won’t. It’s not safe, I’ll go mad if I let you out of my sight.”

“We got through one separation.” I murmur, kissing his hair and running my hands over his broad shoulders. “We can get through another.”

He shakes his head, “It’s not the same. I knew I’d be back before things got too serious, before the baby got too big.” Sinclair’s hands slide to my middle, “there’s no telling how long it might take you to find Reina – how far you might have to go, or how much time you’d have to spend with her to learn whatever she has to teach you.” His wolf’s despair puts tears in my eyes too, but before I can reply he’s talking again. “And it was different when I knew you were under lock and key here. I wasn’t joking when I said

I'd go mad, my wolf will lose his mind if we don't know where you are or whether or not you're safe."

'We'll get through it, because we have to.' I promise, feeling my own sobs begin to build. "The last thing I want to do is be away from you, Dominic. But we don't have a choice here. I have to do this if we're going to win this war."

I feel another violent wave of anger and resistance from his wolf, before something caves inside him. "Not before the summit concludes. Not before I've had at least another week with you two." Sinclair stipulates, letting his authority come through loud and clear.

"After the summit." I agree, feeling both of our hearts break. "Not a moment before.

Chapter 234 – Ella Shares her News

Sinclair

If I'd thought getting out of bed with my mate was difficult yesterday, it's nothing compared to the struggle facing me today. Now that Ella and I have decided to undergo another separation, my wolf is even more on edge than before. All night I slept with my precious mate wrapped so tightly in my arms she couldn't move an inch – a fact which became apparent when she pinched me awake in the middle of the night so that she could go pee. Of course, the moment she returned to my arms I wasted no time making love to her again, but it only appeased my wolf temporarily.

Now, as I watch her snuggle closer to me in the cool morning air, I wonder if I can truly go through with this. Right on cue, Ella opens her glorious gold eyes, and I fall into the bottomless pools. "Good morning." She murmurs, yawning and stretching before leaning in for a kiss. Her lips meet mine with familiar ease, but the taste of my delectable mate sets my wolf to howling, and fire sparks in my blood. It's further proof of what I already know – that no matter how much time passes or how often we come together, my passion for this she-wolf will never dim.

"I changed my mind." I rumble when we finally part. "I can't let you go, Ella."

My sweet mate sighs, frowning deeply as she caresses my muscular arm." Dominic, we talked about this. It's for the best."

"How can it be for the best when we aren't together?" I posit stubbornly, not caring one bit that I sound like a lovesick pup.

"The same way it was for the best for us to divide and conquer when you went visiting the Vanaran territories and I stayed behind." Ella reminds me, kissing my shoulder and drawing my hand to her belly to feel our pup. Rafe is wide awake and alight with energy, though he clearly senses our tangled emotions. There's an edge of confusion and anxiety in his otherwise content consciousness, and I know the clever minx is directing my attention to this on purpose.

"Stop being so rational." I huff, letting my wolf take over. "What happened to the little hellion who made me feel like a murderer for leaving her behind?"

"She learned from her mistakes." Ella answers steadily. "I didn't understand then, I let my hurt feelings and anxiety blind me – but I know better now." A door opens in our bond, and she lets me feel the pain she's struggling to overcome herself – pain she kept hidden last night. I suspect she did so to prevent me using it as an excuse to stay together, but now she shares it to let me feel how she hates this every bit as much as I do.

“What about Rafe?” I demand, “you remember how angry he was with me when I finally returned? How abandoned he felt?”

“And he recovered, because you’re a wonderful father and you showed him that you’ll always be there for him – even when he doesn’t want you to be.” Ella counters in the same gentle tone. “Besides, I’ll tell him every day that it’s my fault and if he should be angry with anyone, it’s me.”

“No you won’t.” I reply sharply. “He can’t be missing me and cross with you at once – it’s too much stress.”

“Alright.” Ella agrees. “Then I’ll tell him once we’re back together so he can retroactively hate me... and we will be back together, Dominic. We’re going to get through this.”

“I don’t want him to hate you.” I grumble, running my hand over her tummy as Rafe rolls around inside of her, sending visible ripples over her taut skin. “I just want there to be some way for us to do it all: find your mother and fight this war, and have our pup without ever leaving each other’s side.”

“It was bound to happen eventually anyway.” Ella reminds me, “I know you weren’t going to take us with you into battle. You were going to leave us here in Vanara while you went off to save the world, weren’t you?”

She’s right, and the impossible creature knows it. Her beautiful face is the picture of innocence, but there’s a knowing glint in her shining eyes that betrays her calculation. “I didn’t think it would be this soon.” I grumpily explain, nibbling her mating mark. “And it’s one thing for you to be under lock and key with Gabriel, and another entirely to send you out into the unknown without me.”

“I know, my love.” She croons, running her fingers through my hair – soothing me against my will. I’m well aware that she’s giving me a taste of my own medicine, and I have to admit it’s rather infuriating. Clever mate, my wolf growls through our bond, though it’s not clear whether it’s intended as praise or complaint. Naughty, incorrigible little wolf.

Just think about how wonderful our reunion will be. Her wolf answers suggestively. We’re not going to have any big scares this time. We’re just going to run – or waddle, in my case – into each other’s arms and ravish each other until we welcome our little angel.

That’s assuming he doesn’t arrive before you can find the answers we need, or before I have to go into battle. My wolf sulks. It’s not as if we can control his arrival.

Dominic, I promise you that no matter what is happening or where I am, I will come to you before he arrives. Even if I have to turn around and leave immediately afterwards,

I'm not going to let this child come into the world without you. A flash of fear seeps through our connection, and I understand that this possibility terrifies her even more than it terrifies me. I couldn't do it on my own, even if I wanted to.

You could. I tenderly chide, there is nothing you cannot do, Ella. You might not want to, but you'll get through it whether I'm there or not.

The point is that you will be there. She insists, because we're going to make sure of it.

I think we both know that this is wishful thinking – pretty words to give our wolves enough hope to go through with the separation. Children have a way of proving that even our best laid plans can and will go awry, and that's when all else is normal – which our lives are certainly not. Even so, these gentle pacifications are enough to calm my wolf, and a few hours later we're sharing our decision with our friends and family.

Dad, Roger, Cora, Gabriel, Isabel, James and Philippe are all gathered in our sitting room, expectantly anticipating an explanation for our mysterious summons. The day's summit events are about to kick off and I'm sure they all assume we're here to talk about that, so it comes as no small shock when Ella declares she's leaving Vanara next Friday.

"What do you mean, you're leaving?" Cora demands, nervously looking back and forth between us.

"Dominic and I have agreed that I need to find my mother, in order to understand the Goddess's plans and my own power." She explains soberly. "It wasn't an easy decision by any means, but the more time that passes, the clearer it becomes that I can't fulfill my destiny unless I discover the secrets of my past... and if anyone has those answers, it's Queen Reina."

"So you're just going to leave?" Isabel demands, surging to her feet. "Just like that?"

"No, not just like that." Ella sighs, "I don't want to go, especially not when everything is so tense. But I don't see another way."

"What about the refugees, the children?" Isabel snaps, cradling Sadie in her arms. "They need you!"

"They might miss me." Ella concedes, too modest for her own good. "But it's you they need, just like the refugees need Dominic and James." Isabel opens her mouth to argue more, but my mate cuts her off, "I'm not doing this for myself Isabel! If I had my way I wouldn't go anywhere, but the pack comes first – our future comes first." Isabel closes her mouth then, looking decidedly sullen as James pulls her down into his lap.

"What about the baby?" Dad inquires, "the doctor is still worried about your stress levels."

I growl in agreement, but Ella speaks over me. “I’m going to be more stressed and endangered if Damon wins because I didn’t do this.”

“Where exactly are we going?” Philippe asks, already knowing that he’ll be guarding her on the expedition.

“I’m not sure yet.” Ella confesses, looking towards my father. “Henry, I hoped you might have some insight into the Queen’s whereabouts.”

“I’ll look into it.” Dad agrees, watching me closely. I can feel him probing my emotions through our bond, and I let him feel my turmoil and resignation. His wolf purrs in my head, and I’m amazed at how effective this is no matter how old I get.

“I’m going with you.” Cora suddenly announces, rising to her feet. “I can’t ask that of you.” Ella replies with a sad smile, “you have your work and

“Ella, I’m coming with you.” Cora repeats firmly, leaving no room for argument. “If you’re going on a quest to find your mother, I’m not letting you do it alone.”

Tears well in Ella’s eyes, and she beams at her surrogate sister. “I’d love nothing more than to have you with me.”

As the women melt into a hug, my own gaze swings to my brother. Roger is staring at Cora with an expression I know all too well – and he is not happy.

Chapter 235 – To Catch a Spy

3rd Person

Roger's wolf was – to say the least – not amused by Cora's decision to accompany Ella on her journey. He knew that her heart was in the right place and that she was strongly motivated by the desire to support her sister, but he also knew that wasn't the only reason she was going.

The obstinate human had been avoiding him like the plague ever since he comforted her in the medical tent, and he hadn't missed the way she'd been watching him just before declaring her intentions. While Ella had been placating Isabel and answering Dad's questions, Cora had been eyeing Roger like a wary rabbit. She knew that she wouldn't be able to resist him much longer, and Ella had just given her the perfect opportunity to flee rather than face her feelings.

Roger stalked out of the opulent guest suite in a minor rage, working to get his wolf under control. Stop being so self-centered, think about how hard this must be for Dorn. Think about how much it will comfort Ella to have her sister along for the trip. He scolded his wolf. It's a family mission after all, and they're family. It's right that Cora should go.

If that were the only reason I wouldn't object. His wolf snarled back. But she's mine. She knows she's mine and she's running away.

She's been running since this all began, it's no surprise that this is her choice. Roger countered, taking deep breaths in and out. This was the very last thing he'd needed today. He'd dedicated the morning to searching for the spy who planted the bomb for Sinclair's convoy, now he was going to be completely distracted.

I don't care if it's no surprise. She's being naughty and she knows it! His wolf sniped ferociously, grumbling wordlessly as he pictured all the delightful ways he might teach her a lesson.

Roger rolled his eyes, cut it out, I don't need an absent mind and an erection. Get your head in the game.

Giving himself a violent shake, Roger made his way to the palace's security headquarters. He'd alerted the urban surveillance team to the spy's presence in the hidden territories as soon as they confirmed the likely suspect. Every day since, he'd started his routine by stopping in to see if any positive IDs were made with Vanara's superior facial recognition software. He wasn't expecting to actually find the spy this way, but he had to exhaust every possibility.

So it was no small surprise, when the guards in charge of monitoring security cameras around the capital came rushing to meet him this morning. Before he could even enter

the office, a junior enforcer was eagerly bouncing up and down in front of him, "Sir, we've got a positive ID!"

"You do?" He asked, aghast. "Where, when?"

"It just came through, I was on my way to find you!" The young wolf reported, "He was caught on a camera in the moonflower district, coming out of an apartment building."

"Take me there." Roger ordered, gesturing for a few other guards to join them. "Now! There's not a moment to waste. If he's in the city, it's because he's upto something."

Fifteen minutes later they pulled up in front of a modest building which Roger now recognized from the high definition photos the young enforcer displayed on a shiny tablet. There was no doubt this wolf was the same man who arrived on James's transport only to immediately disappear, and the Beta's adrenaline was surging as they neared their target.

"How will we know which apartment he's in?" The excited enforcer inquired.

"We'll have to check with the landlord." Roger explained. "I don't want to go through this place knocking on every door and alert the suspect."

It wasn't difficult to find the building owner, and soon they were standing in front of flat number 4, silently signaling as they prepared to enter. The landlord confessed that he'd taken a new renter just last week and hadn't bothered with the usual background checks, and now they had to hope that the suspect was still inside. Roger could smell a fellow Moon Valley wolf through the door, and it was all he could do to keep his temper in check. He'd expected a rogue, not one of their own. Then again, Damon had friends in very low places.

When Roger finally gave the signal, Gabriel's top enforcers crashed through the door, a few of the men shifting in case they needed to fight. Roger marched through the wreckage on two legs, quickly setting his sights on his target. The spy was cowering in the corner, his paws still clenching a tightly shut window. He'd clearly smelled them and attempted to escape, but he was not fast enough.

"What do you want?!" He cried, feigning ignorance. "What is this? I'm just a refugee."

"Shut your mouth before I shut it for you." Roger snarled, prowling forward. "We know exactly who you are and what you've done." It wasn't entirely true, but at their core interrogations were exercises in psychological manipulation, and Roger was willing to lie to get the information he required.

"I don't know what you're talking about." The wolf insisted, holding his hands up

defensively.

'You're a spy for Emperor Damon.' Roger cut back, 'You set the bomb that killed all of the Alpha's best men – his Beta. Your Beta. You committed treason.'

"I swear I didn't!" The man repeated desperately.

"Then what is all this?" Roger turned, following the voice of the enforcer who spoke. The guard in question was standing over a cluttered work table, complete with a scale model of Gabriel's palace. While they watched, the enforcer pulled back an accordion screen, revealing an array of weapons and chemicals. It was obvious what was happening – the assassin had failed to kill Sinclair once, it only made sense that he'd try again.

"It's not what it looks like." The spy squealed, sounding truly frantic.

"It looks like you're planning for a second attack." Roger assessed coldly. "What took you so long? All the increased security for the summit?" Suddenly everything that had seemed overcautious in the preceding days felt necessary, imperative even.

"Please you have to believe me!" The assassin begged, still refusing to admit his guilt.

"The only question is whether you're planning this to get out of Damon's bad books, or because you haven't reported in yet." Roger analyzed, circling on the spot as he took in every detail of the room. "Does Damon know Sinclair still lives?"

"I don't-" The man started to lie.

"Enough!" Roger roared, throwing all of his power into the command. "There is no escaping this – we know you're guilty. The only chance you have now is to cooperate with us. So do you want to play ball and maybe salvage your worthless life, or do you want to die here and now?"

The spy blanched, his skin suddenly seeming very gray. "Damon doesn't know. If Sinclair lives, I don't get paid, I'm not reporting back until the job is done."

"How many of you are there?" Roger questioned sharply.

"As far as I know it's only me, but then Damon wouldn't be likely to tell me if there were others, would he?" the spy replied, his eyes flitting around the room anxiously.

"How did you get here?" Roger asked, just to see if the spy would tell the truth.

"I snuck in on one of your refugee transports." He confessed, "it wasn't hard."

“Did Damon direct you to the transports, or did you find them yourself?” Roger pressed, needing to know exactly how knowledgeable their enemy was about their operations.

“Damon directed me, but I was probably the last spy who got through before he had to shift his forces to meet the humans.” The wolf explained.

Roger didn't trust that this was actually true, but he wasn't foolish enough to admit it. “Join us, turn on Damon, and I'll double whatever he paid you.”

“Why would you do that?” The spy demanded suspiciously.

“Because we need every advantage we can get over Damon – and you should agree because he is going to lose this war. You must have seen how badly he's floundering.” Roger persuaded, making his offer again. “Call your boss and tell him that Sinclair is dead, and you have my word I'll double your fee.”

“How do I know you won't just kill me once I have?” The assassin questioned shrewdly.

“You don't, but you can be sure I'll kill you now if you don't.” Roger threatened.

The spy hesitated for a long moment, the gears visibly turning in his head. He was smart enough to know he was a dead man, but hope was a tricky thing. It had the power to persuade even the most dire pessimists, and when it came to life and death... well, only a fool would turn down a lifeline, no matter how unlikely.

Roger and the enforcers watched as the traitor pulled out his phone and dialed the emperor. A moment later they heard Damon's voice cut off the dial tone, “Is it done?”

“It's done.” The spy lied, shaking where he stood.

“Then your payment will be sent before the day's end.” Damon announced. “Stay available. I may need you again.”

“Yes sir.” The spy hung up, looking anxiously towards Roger.

The Beta confiscated his phone, double checking that the call was actually complete. “Very good.” He praised, his wolf salivating over the imminent kill. “But any wolf who is loyal only to the highest bidder cannot be trusted.” He stalked forward, bearing his fangs, “Any last words?”

Chapter 236 – Aileen’s Sorrow

Ella

Once Sinclair returned and I was allowed off of bed rest, I finally got the opportunity to visit Hugo’s widow Aileen. At least, I thought I would have the chance – instead I was turned away from her door and told in no uncertain terms that she wasn’t accepting visitors. I’ve been back every day since, but this morning is the first time she’s allowed me inside.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” I ask her gently, knowing better than to offer her empty apologies and condolences. “Anything at all?”

“You already are,” She answers wryly, looking up at me from her bed. “You know you, Dominic and Henry are the only ones who have come to see me? Not just to tell me how amazing Hugo was or say how much they pity me, but to find out how I’m doing because you truly care. And of the three of you, you’re the only one who hasn’t gotten the message to leave me alone.”

I shrug, not feeling the least bit sorry. “Sometimes we want to be left alone precisely when we shouldn’t be.” I frown, thinking about the other wolves in the palace – our fellow countrymen. “And don’t take the others’ absence personally. Everyone is caught up in their own worries with the war, and no one likes to be reminded of how quickly it can all be taken away... your grief makes it impossible to avoid.”

Aileen snorts, “you don’t beat around the bush, do you?”

“Would you rather I did? That I diminish the gravity of your loss for the sake of politeness?” I ask, hoping that I’m not miscalculating. My prayer is that a bit of reverse psychology will help Aileen come back to herself for the sake of her pup – who has been spending a great deal of time in the nursery since his mother disappeared into her grief.

“I still have my boy.” Aileen answers firmly, reminding herself of the very fact I came to press upon her

“And how is Davey doing?” I inquire pointedly, though I already know the answer. Sinclair and Henry have been spending any time they can with the poor pup – not that this amounts to much. The horrible reality is that none of us have the bandwidth to give the bereaved the attention they deserve, but the same is true of all the refugees. Doing our jobs as leaders means neglecting them in the present, so that we can ensure they have a future.

Aileen’s gaze drops to her lap, an expression of profound shame overtaking her features. “He’s devastated of course – he thought his father hung the moon. He’s the only thing keeping me going... if he wasn’t here I think...”

"Is he here?" I question gently, looking around the empty room.

"I sent him away." She confesses, tears welling in her eyes. "I kept our bond open, but only just. I didn't want him to see me like this."

"Maybe he needs to see you like this." I suggest, reaching for her hands and clasping them tightly. "Maybe he needs to see that you're hurting just as badly as he is. Hugo isn't the only one who hung the moon for him, Aileen. But right now he's going it all alone."

"But the other pups..." Aileen argues, "and the Alpha. Surely they'll

'They aren't his mother. It's not the same." I insist, rising to my feet. "Come with me to visit the nursery, come see Davey. Or let me bring him to you."

She hesitates, glancing towards a mirror on the far wall. She certainly looks more than a little worse for wear, with great dark circles under her eyes and dirty, lank hair. "I promise you, he doesn't care how you look – only that you're there." I state before she can object.

Aileen nods hesitantly, and together we walk down to the nursery. Isabel and Henry are waiting for us – another scheme I concocted in hopes Aileen might take comfort from people who have been through this and know how she feels. Of course, we haven't even set foot in the room when a small voice cries, "Mommy!!!"

Davey's dark head is racing towards us through the familiar space, crashing into his mother's arms with tears streaming down his cheeks." Mommy where have you been?!" He cries, his words muffled against her breast.

Aileen's arms wrap around him reflexively, but it takes a moment for her to break. When it does happen, she shatters before our very eyes, crashing to her knees and dragging the pup into her lap. "I'm sorry." She moans, rocking him back and forth. "I'm so sorry angel, I've just been so sad."

"But I've b-been sad too!" Davey complained, sniffing, "I k-kept trying to c- come see you but th-they told me I couldn't."

Aileen continues sobbing apologies to her son, and then Isabel and Henry come forward to lend their arms as well.

Sinclair appears by my shoulder, a pained expression on his handsome face as he takes in the scene. "You finally got through to her?"

"Not me." I correct, running my hands over my baby bump and thanking the stars for my

unborn son. 'This was all Davey.'

I know we can't stay much longer, as our first video call with a human government is due to begin in only five minutes. Still, I wish we could stay longer – I wish we could do more for all of our people. As my mate leads me away, I lean into his warmth, "Please tell me you have good news? It's beginning to feel like all we have around here is heartbreak."

"As a matter of fact, I do." Sinclair reveals, kissing my hair. "Roger caught the spy."

"Really?" I gasp, stopping in my tracks. 'That's wonderful!'

Sinclair nods, tucking me under his arm and encouraging me to keep walking. 'The bastard is dead, but he told Damon the assassination was successful before he took his last breath.'

"Surely that will be an advantage to us?" I inquire, my wolf howling with vengeful joy to know our enemy is no longer.

"I hope so, but I have to admit I'm relieved that you'll be leaving Vanara soon." Sinclair declares, surprising me. "Damon knows you're here and he believes I'm out of the way. I'm sure he views you and Rafe as the last threats standing between him and world domination."

Understanding clicks at once, "So we may be more at risk?" I muse aloud, probing our bond for signs of alarm. "And you're still going to let me go?"

"Don't make me think about it too hard, trouble." Sinclair teases, his voice barely more than a growl. "But yes, I believe we made the right decision – though I'm going to arrange more security for you on the journey."

I smother a groan, I really don't want to travel with an entire army, but I'll be damned if I'm going to complain when I know how hard it was for my mate to agree to this plan in the first place. No doubt sensing my reluctance, Sinclair chuckles, kissing me again. 'Thank you for understanding, little wolf. I promise I'm not going to go overboard.'

"Suuree." I tease, "just like when you promised not to get carried away last night?"

He offers me a wolfish grin, and I wonder if it was a mistake to remind him of our marathon lovemaking. After all, we still have a few minutes to spare and his wolf is even more insatiable than usual amidst all this stress. 'That was different, you know I can't resist the taste of your sweet p- Ah, hello Gabriel.' Sinclair abruptly cuts off his sentence as the King rounds the corner in front of us.

Gabriel rolls his eyes, "like I can't guess where that sentence was going? I swear, you

two are determined to scandalize my entire palace.”

“He’s just jealous.” Sinclair whispers in my ear, making me giggle. “He wishes he had a mate to love him senseless every night.

The King merely crosses his arms over his chest. “Are you quite finished? There is a war on, you know?”

“We know. And we’re sorry.” I profess earnestly.

“I’m not.” Sinclair mutters unhelpfully. I swat his arm and he pinches my bottom, making me squeak in surprise.

“We’re ready.” I assure Gabriel, though in truth I’m feeling rather breathless.

No less exasperated than before, the King pushes open the doors to his largest conference room, revealing the assembled Vanaran delegations and a large television screen mounted on the far wall. We take our seats at the head of the table, and then Gabriel opens the call interface.

None of us really know what to expect, and I can only hope that the wolves around me have enough sense and diplomatic skill not to insult the humans with whom we’re about to speak. We’ve done our best to ensure everyone is on the same page about how important a human alliance is – as it’s the only thing which might keep the whole of the shifter world from descending on Vanara while the countries they leave behind collapse.

Of course, the very last thing I expect to see when the screen comes to life, is the woman I once considered to be the leader of my own city. Sinclair’s hands tighten on me when he sees the familiar face of the Moon Valley mayor fill the call window. As far as I know, the last time they saw each other was after the rogue attack in Old Town and she certainly hadn’t been friendly then. On the contrary, she was Damon’s ally.

Chapter 237 – Human Meeting

Sinclair

It's no easy feat to calm my wolf. The moment he sees the cold-hearted human who confronted us after Damon's rogue attack at the Solstice, he begins clawing at the surface of my skin, begging to get out. I desperately work to keep my face blank, though I know my mate can sense my surprise and fury.

She rests one small hand on my thigh, gently caressing my tense muscles. My wolf relaxes slightly, but not nearly enough. He's growling in my head all the way through the introductions, which take much longer than I'd like.

When it's my turn to greet her, I summon my strength. "Madame Mayor." Somehow I manage to say it without enmity, "I didn't realize it was you who would be joining us."

"I think you'll find I'm the only reason anyone is joining at all." The former Moon Valley mayor, a woman by the name of Sabina Kelly, replies coolly. At first her words don't make sense, but then the video pans out, revealing that she is far from the only guest joining this call. Grim-faced men line the table on either side of her, and though some are as unknown to me as any stranger, others are surprisingly familiar. I see legislators, governors and leading activists from the human world, even a few politicians to whom we reached out with no reply. I can scarcely wrap my mind around the assembled delegates before Sabina is speaking again. "Nor can I rightly claim the title of mayor since Damon saw fit to depose me."

"Well with all due respect, you are an elected official – Damon is not." I reply, falling back on my diplomatic training to smooth the troubled waters between us. "So I would prefer to call you by the title your people afforded you."

I'm thankful my mouth is still working, because my mind is reeling. The last time I spoke to this woman she seemed to truly hate me – not that she cared for shifters in general. I'll never forget the way she sneered the words "your kind" at me that day, foisting blame for the attack onto all wolves as if we've all been cut from the same cloth. Of course that was merely one incident in a hundred. I can't remember ever having a productive conversation with her throughout the entirety of our acquaintance.

"Thank you." Sabina answers hesitantly. "Though I want to be very clear that we only agreed to this meeting to hear what you have to say. Those of us in power have known about shifters for some time now, but the last month has inflicted lasting scars on our people. We cannot overlook the violence you have inflicted upon our communities as of late."

"I understand, and I must tell you that humans are not the only ones suffering under Damon's rule." I reply steadily. "Our own people are suffering gravely under his tyranny,

and it is our greatest wish to remove him from power.” I turn my gaze on each of the humans individually.” Whatever Dmaon has led you to believe about humans and wolf-kind, I’m here to tell you that he does not speak the truth. We are not all so backwards and violent – we do not all think as he does.”

‘Then how do you think?’ A man I don’t recognize inquires.

“Perhaps it would be best if you heard from someone to whom the knowledge of wolf-kind came as a very recent surprise.” Gabriel suggests, nodding to Ella.

My mate leans forward, resting her clasped hands on the table. ‘Thank you, Gabriel,’ She begins hesitantly, “It might surprise you to hear that, despite my current position, I was raised among humans in Moon Valley. In fact, I believed I was human until a couple of months ago, so there are actually a few of you who have been in on the secret even longer than I have.” I watch the humans closely as Ella’s words hit home, noticing a few confused expressions and curious grumbles.

“When Dominic told me about shifters I thought he was out of his mind, until I saw proof which made it impossible to deny. It took a lot of time for me to adjust to the new reality, to understand the way of wolves and my place in this world. I’m still learning every day, and it isn’t easier just because my wolf is now awake. But part of what makes adjusting so difficult is that shifters are as varied and diverse as any other society.” She pauses, making eye contact with each of the faces on the screen. “I would never dream of meeting someone from Sevka and assuming that they represent every being on that continent. There are good and bad people in every community, and even those designations are misleading, as each of us is the result of the experiences which shaped our lives.”

Ella glances at me for reassurance, and my wolf purrs through our bond as she continues. ‘The point is simply that while shifters share a great deal in common biologically, culture and personality are different matters entirely. Damon is, in my opinion, the worst of the worst. It would be a mistake to judge him for being a wolf, because that isn’t the proper frame of reference. He didn’t take over our home because he’s a shifter, he did it because he’s a power-hungry narcissist with too many resources in reach.” She purses her lips, uncertain about her next piece of advice. “Instead, I would beseech you to remember the centuries of peace we enjoyed living among shifters without ever knowing it.”

“You mean the centuries and centuries you lied to us?” Another human counters gruffly.

“I’m sorry,” Ella sighs, “But what nation hasn’t lied to one another in order to advance their own peoples? Have you all announced every technology, innovation and defense strategy your country employs? Or have you safeguarded sensitive information to avoid greater competition or harm?”

“But we aren’t all separate nations.” One of the activists objects, “as you said, we lived side by side.”

“Side by side, with independent governments.” I chime in, holding my mate a bit closer. “Besides, the secrecy pact did not apply universally. Your leaders knew of shifters, and select humans were brought to work with shifters because of their expertise in their fields. Our governments have been working together all along, and though the secrecy among the general public may not inspire trust, any rational actor can understand why it might feel necessary. We wanted to avoid precisely this scenario.”

“Has it occurred to you that this scenario only occurred because of the secrecy, not despite it?” A legislator asks shrewdly.

“Yes.” I confess. “You have no idea how that very question has kept me up at night. And though we may all be guilty of perpetuating it, like you we were born into a system our ancestors created. We did what we thought was best, however misguided.” I exhale, letting them see the full weight of my guilt. “The point is that right or wrong, shifters only want what is best for our families and our people. We do not want violence and war, we do not want Damon in power.”

Sabina clears her throat, and I hold my breath – praying she won’t say anything to undermine our message. “The reason I asked you all to join me today is because I have insight from the experience of working with both the Usurper and Alpha Sinclair. Before the coup and my exile to Sevka, I thought much like you did. I put up with shifters because I had no other choice, and I didn’t like it.” She confesses. “Frankly, I believed that Alpha Dominic was full of it. Damon convinced me that his public persona was all a show – that he was nothing more than a con artist who hoped to steal the crown by acting like a moralizing, bleeding heart, charmer.”

“Then the war came, and I saw that I’d believed the wrong man.” Sabina carries on, shamefaced. “Alpha Dominic tried to expose Damon’s crimes, but instead of answering for them the Usurper sped up his plans for takeover. In truth, I’ve come to believe that Dominic’s accusations are the only reason we’ve held off as well as we have – they forced Damon to rush and act before he was ready.”

My jaw drops, and Ella sweetly sets it back in place with one small finger.

Perhaps I’m an idiot, but that possibility – the idea that I might have helped lessen the damage by speaking out when I did – has never occurred to me before. I can’t express how badly I want it to be true, though I know wishful thinking can be a dangerous thing.

“I made the mistake of believing Damon when he told me you weren’t a fit ruler.” Sabina forges on, speaking directly to me now. “When he told me that he would protect humans

and wolves alike if he came to power. It isn't easy to admit just how wrong I was, but it would be an even greater betrayal of my people to do nothing now, when you have reached out to us in friendship."

Again Sabina looks to the other humans. "We have a common enemy with these shifters, and the situation is dire enough that we cannot be choosy. Luckily that's not a problem, because Dominic is the ally I would choose above anyone else. He is a good man, a selfless leader who cares more about wolves and humans alike. He is brave enough to stand for the things that truly matter, strong enough to defend us, and smart enough to know when to fight and when to hold off. I encourage all of you to give this alliance your full consideration and spread the word throughout your network. We do not have to be alone in this fight."

To my amazement, a number of the other humans are nodding in agreement. I can scarcely believe this is really happening, but when I look to my mate, she's sending me an incandescent smile. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

Chapter 238 – Hypnosis Part 4

Trigger warning: suicidal ideation – please take care!

Ella

We've all been on a high ever since our meeting with the humans yesterday. No one expected more than one contact to attend, and we certainly didn't anticipate Sabina Kelly. I was prepared to have a knock down, drag out fight in order to convince them to even give us a chance, but Moon Valley's exiled mayor did all the work for us.

We later learned that our initial outreach fell on mostly deaf ears and if it hadn't been for Sabina, no one would have even considered our offer to talk. It's actually rather ironic – if Damon hadn't manipulated the woman she probably wouldn't have come forward, so his lack of scruples have directly laid the groundwork for his demise. Of course, this is nothing compared to learning that Sinclair may have prevented worse atrocities by moving against Damon when he did – I know that suggestion meant the world to him.

Still, it was not all so easy going. Many of the humans had very real concerns about creating alliances with actors who are basically political unknowns, and others seemed to genuinely struggle with fighting fire with fire. In the end the human representatives agreed to review our plans and provide feedback before undertaking further discussions about joining forces, and we're scheduled to reconvene next week. My hope is that they'll follow Sabina's example by spreading the word and encouraging more of their own allies to join the next meeting, but for the time being it's a waiting game.

I wish we had time to celebrate, because even though we didn't quite get a victory, I think it's important to celebrate the good things while we can. Instead I'm beginning my fourth hypnosis appointment. Sinclair and I agreed to try one last session with Leon before I set out to find my mother, and as happy as I am to have my mate beside me, I'm not looking forward to uncovering another painful episode from my past.

"How are you feeling, trouble?" Sinclair asks, stroking my hair as I lay on the sitting room sofa. His wolf has been even more protective and bossy than usual in the face of my impending departure, and it doesn't help that I've been a walking basket case this morning. He's done his level best to keep me calm and relaxed up to this point, and now the ether is taking the wheel. My senses are already dulling beneath the familiar fog of the drug – if it wasn't for the solid cushions around me I might think I'm floating.

"Twirly." I answer with a giggle, petting his scruffy jaw and admiring his beautiful green eyes. The edges of his massive shape are blurring, and the room beyond his broad shoulders disappears completely. His face is the only thing in focus, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Twirly hmm?" Sinclair grins, catching my wrist and kissing my palm. He's already

purring, and belatedly I wonder if I can convince him to lie down with me. There's not really room for both of us on the sofa, but I could lie on top of him or sit in his lap. The mere thought of feeling his arms wrapped around me sends my wolf into a fit of longing.

"You're too far away." I complain, not answering his question.

"I'm right here, little wolf." He reminds me, his deep voice tender. "I've got you, and I'm not going anywhere."

"But I want to cuddle." I pout, trying and failing to remember what else we're supposed to be doing.

"I will give you all the cuddles your little heart desires as soon as we're done." Sinclair promises, tracing his thumb over my protruding lower lip. I nip at the digit, catching it between my sharp fangs and running my tongue over the salty surface. His wolf rumbles in my head and my inner animal shivers with delight. She's nuzzling and rubbing all over him, but he holds strong, replete with stern amusement.

"I think it may be better if you two had some more space between you." Leon advises from somewhere behind Sinclair. The sound of his voice makes me jolt, as I'd completely forgotten he's here.

"I think you should focus on your job and leave my mate to me." Sinclair counters in a low growl. The nerve of the man. He says through our bond, Telling me what to do with my own, sweet mate. I've killed men for less.

Have you really? I ask, not pausing to wonder why the idea of violence delights me so much.

No, but it is tempting. He answers darkly, flashing his fangs and making me giggle again.

"With all due respect Alpha, Ella needs to be able to focus on the session." Leon replies easily. "Right now she's so caught up in you that accessing her memories will be impossible."

Sinclair grumbles in displeasure, but retracts his talented hands. "Alright sweetheart, you heard the mean man." He tells me regretfully. "We have to focus." I stretch my neck so I can see past Sinclair and stick my tongue out at Leon, and though he doesn't say a word I know Sinclair wants to laugh and scold me for being naughty, i

"Okay Ella." Leon says, clearly trying to take control again. "Close your eyes and let the ether take you back. Forget all your troubles, everything that's happening in the here and now. Clear your mind and let the memories come to you." He speaks in the same soporific tone he always uses, but the addition of Sinclair's steady presence and

comforting purrs allow me to fall into the mysterious realm faster than ever. Soon I'm gliding along on a river of consciousness that is neither dream nor reality, strange images swirling through my mind and evoking emotions I can't quite grasp.

Everything seems surreal and yet out of reach, but I'm becoming used to these altered states and I can't find much frightening when Sinclair is with me.

"The last time we met, you recalled meeting a mysterious woman at the orphanage Leon prompts.

"The Goddess." I correct him, my words slurring slightly.

"The Goddess," He agrees, "can you remind me how you felt when you spoke to her?"

"I felt..." I pause, considering the question. "Safe. Loved... like I had a purpose."

"Is that an unusual feeling for you? Having a purpose?" Leon inquires, latching onto the offered information with the demeanor of a tracker on a scent.

I hadn't thought about it before, but now that he mentions it... "Yes." I confirm, my voice suddenly thick with emotion. "That was the only time in my entire childhood that I ever felt as if my life had meaning. As if there was a reason I was put on this earth... I don't know why though, she was just telling me a story."

"Because it was your story." Leon assesses, his voice gentle. "But try not to get too caught up in logic or reason. Just follow that thread... the ether is leading you somewhere, Ella."

"I don't know where." I answer with mild frustration. "It wasn't fun feeling that way... there were times..." I trail off, balking at the morose emotions bubbling up inside of me.

"There were times that what?" Leon presses, "keep going."

And just like that the room dissolves.

I'm 16 years old and it's the dead of night. I'm standing on a bridge overlooking the frozen river, wondering how cold the water would feel against my skin... wondering how long it would take to pull me under... to freeze me too. Is my body even heavy enough to break through the ice?

Would I simply be crushed against the gleaming surface like a big blonde bug?

Cora's face appears in my mind and guilt slams into me for even considering this. I can't leave her alone in the world... but what is there to leave her to? Every day is the same –

more pain, more hardship and sorrow. I've become skilled at burying the hurt, but my sister suffers every blow as if it's the first. I can't stand it. People only seem to want to harm us, and try as I might, I can't see any way out. I just want it to stop.

But if it stops for me, it would be a new beginning for Cora – and not the good kind. It would drag her to a new depth of despair and leave her vulnerable to everything from which I've tried to shield her. I can't intentionally inflict that kind of harm... but what if it wasn't intentional...

what if it was merely an unfortunate accident? I could try balancing on the bridge's railing, and leave the outcome upto fate. If I cross the bridge that way and don't fall it would be a sign to keep going, and if I do... then at least I know my pain will be at an end.

I'm going to do it. After all... what do I have to lose

Chapter 239 – Vision

Trigger warning: suicidal ideation – please take care!

Ella

I'm about to hoist myself up onto the frozen railing when two robed figures appear on either side of me, their faces both familiar and strange. There's something about them that sets off alarms in my mind, but not the usual kind. It feels as though I'm trying to remember something from another life ... from someone else's life.

I don't have the faintest idea where they came from, and I don't really care. Cora's safe at the orphanage and it's not as if they can do worse to me than what I've already survived. Maybe this is even fate answering my question, giving me a way out in her typical morbid fashion. Perhaps an icy plunge is too easy an end for me, perhaps I must know one final agony before I go. "Are you here to kill me?" I ask in a voice I don't recognize.

"Do you want to die?" One asks, leaning his arms against the icy metal.

"It's not that I want to die." I hiccup, tears falling from my lashes and freezing against my cheeks. "It's just that I don't want to live if this is all life has to offer... and I'm afraid that this is truly all there is for me. I have no reason to believe otherwise." I shake my head forlornly, "they say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results. So I would be crazy to think I can keep meeting the sun each morning without inviting more heartache... wouldn't I?"

"That depends. What you call crazy, others might call hope." The second man replies, making no move to look at or touch me. The three of us simply stare out at the frozen expanse with the same melancholy spirit, watching the river rushing below the ice so far below.

"Hope is a privilege for those born in the light." I reply, not entirely understanding where these words are coming from. "They know that the darkness is only temporary because they don't belong there... but how am I to believe in light when I've never seen it?"

"And if we were to give you a glimpse of the future?" The first man offers. "If we were to show you a vision of the life you might have one day, if you find the will to believe despite your experiences?"

"You can do that?" I ask, turning to look at him for the first time.

"Only if you are brave enough to take the risk." The second answers.

"And only if you are willing to fight for your future." The first man adds. "The vision we

give you will only be a possibility – one in a hundred – of the person you might become if you refuse to give up. It is not guaranteed, and it is not entirely in your control. Countless actions and decisions shape our futures, and we can only tell you that this may come to pass if everything goes right.”

“Show me.” I beg, somehow believing they have this power even though there’s no such thing as magic. Perhaps I’ve lost my mind. Perhaps I’ve already jumped and this is all a hallucination on the brink between worlds.

The robed men take hold of my hands in perfect synchrony, and I let them. As our palms connect a brilliant white light surges between our skin. It’s so bright I have to shut my eyes against the glare, but it does not hurt – it does not burn me as it probably should. Energy surges through my body, so potent and wild that I feel like I’m being electrocuted. I open my mouth to cry out, but before any sound can escape my lips a torrent of color bursts in my mind’s eye.

I see a woman who looks exactly like me, only much older. Her belly is not bloated with hunger, her skin is not lifeless and pale. She’s clean and healthy, wearing a dress which must cost more than everything I’ve ever owned – combined. She moves with such an easy grace, and when she smiles I understand why people tell me I’m beautiful.

The woman is looking at something I cannot see, grinning with an overwhelming joy I can’t even begin to understand. In the next moment I see a man more than twice her size, who is as handsome as he is terrifying. He moves with the lethal grace of a predator, and there’s a vicious edge to his bronzed, raven-haired beauty. He approaches her like a wolf stalking his prey, but she isn’t afraid. He pulls her into his strong arms and kisses her soundly, and when they part she looks down at a tiny bundle in his arms.

They coo and croon over a baby with rose gold hair and a pink bow, pulling faces and tickling the infant’s swaddled tummy. Then a rush of pure exuberance bursts into the serene scene, and three bundles of energy come zooming into sight. There’s a boy around five years old, who is the spitting image of the huge man. He races forward and crashes into his parents’ legs, wrapping his arms around each and grinning mischievously up at them. A pair of toddlers quickly follow, one who appears to be a miniature version of the older boy, and the other an angelic looking girl with the same coloring as the babe.

They pile into the group hug and their father bends down to scoop them up into his arms, balancing the three older children while his wife cradles the youngest. I can hear their laughter, but I can feel it too. Their happiness is foreign to me and yet so contagious, merely watching them makes me feel as if I’ve swallowed the sun. Is that what they feel every day? Is it possible to ever be so full of emotion when the void inside of me is so bottomless?

The vision disappears as quickly as it came, and when I open my eyes again they're full of tears. "That's me?" I choke, "I could have a family one day? That family?"

"Only if you are willing to fight for it." The second man repeats. "Nothing is handed to us in life, especially not this. It will be a difficult road ahead, but there are rewards at the end if you're brave enough to make the journey."

"Haven't I already been through enough?" I ask, wondering why some people do seem to be handed everything, while others must constantly struggle.

"The trials you've overcome have ensured you're strong enough to win the fight, but you have to enter it yourself. You have to want to win, Ella." The first man explains.

"How do you know my name?" I ask, but I never get my answer. The men turn and walk away, and ten minutes later I don't remember meeting them at all. In fact, I don't remember why I'm out here in the middle of the night or what I'm doing standing on this bridge. Certain I'm going to catch my death from cold, I hurry back to the orphanage and my sister – praying no one noticed my absence.

The memory fades away as Leon calls me back to the present, "Come back to us, now." He encourages. "You did so well."

"I'm here, Ella." Sinclair purrs, his lips grazing my tear-stained cheek. "I'm here, I've got you."

I open my eyes and find my mate watching me with shining eyes. His hand rests on my swollen middle, calming our unborn pup as I struggle to resurface. "I saw you." I tell him in amazement. "I saw you... and Rafe" I recall, remembering the oldest boy in the vision. "There were other pups too."

"I know." Sinclair beams, kissing me softly. "I know, baby. I'm so proud of you."

"Does that..." I trail off, trying to wrap my mind around the scene we just witnessed. Unfortunately the ether is still in control, and I almost lose my train of thought. "Does that mean we're fated somehow?"

Sinclair frowns. "Wolves only get one fated mate, sweetheart. I think that was just a possibility of our paths crossing one day if you chose to live. You heard what the priests said – nothing they showed you was guaranteed."

"But you told me sometimes mates are fated, not because they're good together, but in order to become the people they're meant to be." I remind him stubbornly, hoping that my logic is being guided by evidence and not the ether. "I was born to unite humans and wolves in this war, and you were destined to lead the resistance. You had to be with

Lydia in order to become the man you are today... to this point in your life without children so that you would turn to the sperm bank precisely when I did. If you hadn't then my wolf would never wake and we would never have Rafe... what is that if not fate?"

Sinclair smiles tenderly, "Maybe you're right... after all, these sessions have taught us that shifters don't understand our world nearly as well as we think we do. Maybe it's possible to have more than one destined mate."

For a long moment we get completely lost in each other's eyes, and before too long all the twirly sensations I'd been feeling earlier come surging back at full force. However we don't get to indulge ourselves for too long because, ever the therapist, Leon finds a way to bring us back down to earth.

"Ella, I think we might be better served addressing the things which took you to that bridge in the first place." Leon suggests.

"Leon?" Sinclair responds, not taking his eyes off of me.

"Yes, Alpha?" The therapist inquires eagerly.

Put a sock in it.

Chapter 240 – Ella and Sinclair Celebrate

Ella

After Leon leaves Sinclair takes me to bed, though not for the reason I initially hoped. I cling to him as he tries to place me in my nest, “What are you doing?” I inquire indignantly.

“Trying to help you get comfortable.” He replies, petting my cheek. “You need to rest.”

“You promised we’d cuddle.” I remind him, refusing to let go. I wrap my legs around his back, hanging off of him like a very round sloth.

“I did, but I think we both know that’s not what you’re interested in right now.” Sinclair rumbles affectionately, gently detaching my limbs from his big body. I huff and stretch out beneath him, wriggling out of my clothes and enticing him with my lush curves. His emerald eyes rake over my naked skin with open appreciation, and I hear his wolf grumbling with barely contained desire.

He’s not wrong about my intentions. This is the ether’s doing – a side effect I haven’t yet experienced because Sinclair hasn’t been with me during the previous sessions. The drug is not only consuming my mind in a haze of dreamy images and surreal illusions, but the euphoric sensations which once seemed like innocent joy now translate into overwhelming lust.

With Sinclair’s heady aroma and dominant energy filling my senses, my limbs become deliciously heavy, and a sultry heat radiates from my core. My blood simmers and pulses, accumulating in my breasts and dripping sex, swelling them with carnal need. My love for my mate is so powerful in this moment that I can’t even contemplate keeping it to myself. It wants to pour out of me in a great rush, to drown my mate in affection and bring us both to rapture.

“We just discovered something wonderful, Dominic.” I state in a voice as smooth as silk. “We should celebrate.”

Sinclair sighs, fluffing the pillows around my body and tucking me beneath a weighted blanket. “I hate to say it but I don’t think you’re in the right state of mind for that.” He declares firmly, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Besides, not all of that memory was good, my love. Are you sure you aren’t just focusing on the nice part to avoid thinking about the rest?”

“Of course I’m sure.” I counter stubbornly, pushing the blanket off of me and sidling closer to him. “The ether isn’t making me imagine I want you, Dominic. I always want you.” I profess, leaning into his side and kissing his neck. “Are you truly going to deny me just because I’m a little high?”

'That's exactly what I'm going to do, you naughty thing.' Sinclair answers sternly, "now stop flirting with me and lie down."

My wolf whines pitifully, and I slump back against the pile of pillows. Sinclair's hungry gaze follows my every move, and I sense his dire temptation through our bond. A flash of devious inspiration strikes, and I part my legs, letting him see just how aroused I am—ensuring my scent assails him at full force.

Sinclair groans, his wolf snarling with frustration and heightening my arousal even further. "Such a brazen little wolf." He croons, towering over my prone body with dark, sensual intent. 'You don't have any inhibitions right now, do you, trouble?' He observes, sliding his fingers through my slick cleft, teasing my aching clit with a featherlight touch that nonetheless makes me arch and cry out. "Putting this sweet pussy on display like this... tempting me with all your honey?" He removes his hand only to take his fingers into his mouth, licking my arousal from his long fingers with a rumble of pleasure. The scandalous sight leaves me panting, but then Sinclair captures my nape in his powerful grip, lowering his face until our noses are practically touching. "Do you really believe I'm going to let you get away with it?"

I nod hopefully, but my mate's ominous chuckle makes my heart sink. "Wrong answer, baby." He nips my trembling lower lip. "When the ether wears off I'm going to rut you senseless, but not before I teach you what happens to bad girls who try to top from the bottom."

"But you've done that before." I object, my sex clenching with the memory of the night he finally claimed me.

"Well clearly the lesson didn't stick." Sinclair rumbles, kissing me fiercely. * Lucky for you I'm a very patient wolf."

To my utter dismay, my mate is as good as his word. A few hours later I'm spread-eagled on the bed with Sinclair's head buried between my legs, his talented tongue tormenting me to no end.

'This isn't fair!' I whimper desperately, "I was high!" I've been spanked and worked up into an impossible lather, forced to orgasm over and over again as my mate overwhelms me with more pleasure than I can bear. I never know how Sinclair is going to punish me, and today he seems to have decided to teach me to be careful what I wish for – by giving me too much of it. Frankly I can't decide whether it's worse to be overwhelmed with too many climaxes or denied them until I'm a begging, babbling mess. At this point I'm so sensitive that the slightest touch can send me over the edge again, detonating in a terrifying blend of ecstasy and pain.

“And you were a defiant imp who left me with blue balls all day long.” Sinclair replies, guiding me onto my hands and knees. ‘You’re lucky I’m so proud of you, or I might have refused to claim you at all.’”

I scoff before I can think better of it, “Fat chance, with me leaving in less than a week. I’m surprised your wolf even lets me out of bed.”

“Is that so?” Sinclair responds, his deep bass full of foreboding. ‘Then perhaps we aren’t finished yet, after all.’”

Despite his words, I hear his belt buckle clink and my wolf sags with relief. Finally, she moans in my head, driving me to sway my punished bottom in invitation. As raw as my intimate flesh is, nothing compares to being filled and marked by my mate, and she won’t be satisfied until he takes this final step.

Sinclair growls, dragging his hard length through my sodden folds, using my own arousal to coat his huge cock before pressing the thick tip to my back entrance. I jolt slightly, because we’ve only done this in our dreams. Sinclair purrs and rests his free hand on the small of my back, rubbing my lumbar in soothing circles. “Easy, sweetheart.” He encourages, some of the fire fading from his voice. “I’ll go slow.”

I whine as he presses forward, feeling the foreign stretch of my forbidden channel. My cheeks flush with embarrassment as his thick head finally pops inside, feeling so strange and wrong... so oddly exquisite. “That’s it,” He praises, reaching down to stroke my overly-sensitized clit. All of my inner muscles clench and a moan escapes my lips as Sinclair eases further inside me. “Good girl, just relax. Remember how much you loved this the first time? How you came to pieces before I could even think about touching your needy clit?”

I shake my head, not understanding why something that sounds so wrong can excite me so much. I know Sinclair loves scandalizing my sensibilities, but that doesn’t explain why I enjoy it in equal measure. When he’s finally buried to the hilt Sinclair drags my back up against his chest, claiming my mouth as I adjust to his size. My lips part on a silent gasp when he begins to pull out, and he swallows the non-sound with a ravenous purr.

Sinclair withdraws almost entirely before thrusting back inside of me in a single move, and I cry out as his flared cockhead rubs up against my g-spot through the thin walls separating my passages. He does it again and again, and before I know it I’m abruptly thrown over the edge of orgasm. It seems like too much too fast, but my body is strung as tight as a bow after all his expert handling. ‘You see?’ Sinclair growls, all predator now, ‘Your body was made for me, we fit together so perfectly that you can’t help but find pleasure in anything we do.’”

There’s a note of pure elation in his voice, and I understand he was every bit as eager to

celebrate our newly fated status as I was – he simply had more patience. A tiny ache I hadn't realized I was carrying eases in my chest, comforted to discover the desire wasn't one-sided. "Mine," He purrs, increasing the pace of his thrusts as his hands work wonders on my breasts and clenching sex. "My fated Ella. I knew you were meant for me. You're too perfect not to be – everything I could ever dream of and more."

At any other time I might try to tell him that I'm far from perfect, but I know there's no reasoning with his wolf right now. If I try it will undoubtedly result in another spanking... though now that I think of it... "I'm not perfect."

Chapter 241 – Hope

Ella

Sinclair's heartbeat thumps steadily beneath my ear as his hands move over my body, massaging away all the kinks in my overworked muscles. I've been fading in and out of consciousness for the last hour, floating in a very different kind of high than the one induced by ether. Sinclair tells me it's not unusual for she-wolves to enter a heightened plane of consciousness amidst such an onslaught of pleasure, but I'm still getting used to the violent surge of endorphins holding my body captive.

I feel completely boneless in my mate's arms and I really don't want to move, but my stomach is growling and I can sense Rafe's hunger through our bond. Sinclair senses this too, gently untangling our bodies so he can rise. I murmur in complaint and he kisses my hair, promising to return with food. I snuggle deeper into the plush bedding as his footsteps recede, still reveling over the information revealed in my most recent hypnosis session.

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It's not that I find the idea of chosen mates any less romantic or important than fated ones. In fact, in some ways I think chosen mates are more special because they derive from a love which transcends divine power.

No, I think Sinclair and I are simply so happy because this news confirms what we've both felt for some time now: that we were made for one another and nothing in this world can come between us now that we've found each other.

Of course it's not merely comforting, it also bolsters our spirits in the face of the war ahead. When Sinclair returns from the kitchens carrying a tray piled high with my favorite foods, I confess just how profoundly the priests' vision impacted me.

"I know it was meant to give me hope back then, but I think I needed to see it now too. I needed to know there's a chance we can beat Damon – that we can be that happy." I say softly, accepting a bite of strawberry from his hand. "I understand it's only one possibility, but if we can figure out how to win this war then that beautiful family – that incredible future is somewhere in our cards... we just have to play the right ones."

"I needed it too." Sinclair admits, holding a cheese-laden cracker to my lips. I accept the bite and chew, but I'm surprised to hear my mate disclose such doubts. He's always so confident and in control, and though it may seem counter-intuitive, it's a comfort to know he worries about our future just as much as I do.

"Really?" I ask, once I've swallowed the tasty morsel.

“You and Rafe are my strength, Ella.

Sinclair answers, his voice like gravel. You’re what keeps me going in my darkest moments. When everything else in the world seems wrong, I sleep easy knowing that there are at least two things which are so right it hurts... so much so that I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to go on if anything happened to you.” He offers me a tender smile. “You’re not the only one whose world was turned upside down when we met, trouble.”

“That’s why it was so hard for you to agree to let me go.” I assess, stroking his cheek.

“That and because I’m a greedy bastard who wants my sweet mate within reach at all times.” Sinclair quips, only half-joking.

But yes, it will be easier to watch you drive away next week knowing that our family has a chance to not only survive, but thrive and grow even larger and more wonderful.” He sighs, reclining next to me and nibbling a piece of chocolate. “And if I’m being completely honest, it helped convince my wolf that finding your mother is the right move.” A wry canine grin flashes over his gorgeous features. “He doesn’t always respond to logic with the same ease I do.”

I chuckle, but my amusement with the ironic statement is short-lived. “I wish you could come with me.” I share, gnawing on my lower lip. “It is the right decision, isn’t it?”

I’m not sure where this sudden rush of doubt comes from, but I do realize why I couldn’t acknowledge it before now. I needed Sinclair to be entirely on board with the plan before wavering, because now that we’re on the same page the stakes aren’t simply about missing one another or safety they’re about strategic value.

“I’m afraid so.” My mate nods, offering me another strawberry. “The Goddess set all this in motion, and so far she hasn’t led us astray. Everything that has gone right has been part of her plan, so it only makes sense that we continue down that path.”

“Okay.” I nod, feeling the knot in my stomach ease. “I promise I’ll do everything in my power to ensure we have that future together.”

“So will I.” Sinclair vows, “But we can’t let it make us complacent or take it for granted. You remember what the priests said? There are no guarantees. One wrong move and it could slip through our fingers.”

“I know.” I confirm, knowing Sinclair is only reminding me because he’s so afraid that it won’t come to be. It terrifies me too.

He’s holding up a bite of chicken now, but I ignore it, leaning past his hand to steal a kiss. He cradles my head as we melt into the intimate act, his tongue teasing the seam

of my lips and delving into my mouth. He tastes me with languid ease, running his hands over my belly as Rafe flutters and kicks. The pup has been radiating happiness ever since the session, no doubt feeding off of our own joy.

Of course, when we part Sinclair is watching me with an intensity that goes beyond mere affection. "Do you want to talk about the rest of the memory?" He asks.

I exhale, snagging the chicken from his fingers and using it as an excuse to delay my answer. When I finish chewing I say, "It's strange. This morning I had no recollection of ever feeling that way. I've experienced depressions and low points of course, but I always thought I pulled through because I had no other choice." I frown, not wanting to acknowledge this new window into my past. "But now that the ether has uncovered it, I remember every detail, every dreadful ounce of that pain and hopelessness."

Sinclair doesn't say anything, simply humming in sympathy and feeding me another bite. "I'm so ashamed that I ever considered abandoning Cora that way." I

confess, already wanting to change the subject again. I can feel tears welling, and I don't want to trade this glowing warmth for the doom and gloom of my past. Even so, I know my mate won't let me get away with avoiding this conversation. "I spent so many years wondering what I'd done to deserve my life... why I was being punished. I couldn't figure out what I'd done wrong, and eventually I did start to tell myself it had to be for some larger purpose... that there was a reason I was suffering." I pause, swiping at an escaped tear. "I told myself I was being challenged so I could grow up and do great things: help others, prevent other children from experiencing the same horrors."

I shake my head, choking on my next words. "But that day one of the boys I'd considered.

to be part of our little orphan pack died. He was only 7, and he'd gone to a foster family just a couple of weeks earlier." I explain, everything rushing back at once. "They killed him after everything he survived at the orphanage... and suddenly it hit me – none of it was happening for a reason, and I wasn't special. How could I be, when every child around me was being abused in the same way?"

Sinclair starts to purr, and I can hear his wolf whining in my head. I try to pull back on my feelings so that they don't all flow through our bond, but my mate growls in warning and I surrender. "His death gutted me. It was proof that there was no hope for any of us – a reminder that too many people never make it to a better life... that people are cruel for the sake of being cruel and some lives are just short and brutal – full stop..." Heaving in a shaking breath, I continue, "That was the one time I considered ending it all, and I'm so glad now that I didn't."

Sinclair caresses my hair, "They showed you that you'd been right all along... you were

being tested.”

“That isn’t the reason.” I correct him softly. “Because the rest is still true... the others didn’t have to go through all that. It happened because there are too many broken people in this world, and the vision didn’t change that reality.” I move my hands to my belly, taking strength from the tiny life within. “I hung on because they showed me I could be happy one day. I saw you and Rafe and the babies we could yet conceive. It didn’t matter whether I was being tested... I just needed to know there was hope things could be different in the future... I wish that every person who feels trapped and without a way out could receive such a gift.”

“Ella, you do realize that you’ve given us all that gift today?” Sinclair asks gently, moving his hand to cover mine. I blink in confusion, and he smiles tenderly down at me.

“Everyone in this war is struggling to find a light in the darkness, and it’s getting harder every day. But that vision wasn’t just about you and me... it was about the future of the united packs – of our world.” He smiles, gazing at me with so much love my heart feels like it might burst. “Baby, that vision means we can win.”

Chapter 242 – 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?”

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“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.”

Chapter 243 – Alliances

Ella

I stare at Henry in utter belief, my conversation with my impossible sister immediately slipping my mind. “You found her?” I gape, instinctively reaching for Cora’s hand. Her warm palm settles in mine, squeezing tightly.

“It wasn’t easy.” Henry admits, moving further into the room. “I reached out to every surviving contact I could think of, to no effect. Then I tried the news archives from the time, since they reported on the King’s death and Reina’s departure so thoroughly. They all said the same thing – that she was devoting herself to the Goddess, but none seemed to know where she was going to serve.”

Audible Gift Memberships

“So how did you figure it out?” Cora asks, sounding every bit as excited as I feel.

“I followed the money.” Henry explains, in a statement so vague and clichéd I could scream with impatience. “I had one of Gabriel’s computer forensic specialists hack into the royal banking records back home in Moon Valley. Luckily Damon hasn’t destroyed the financial archives dating back that far.” He shares eagerly. “He discovered that Queen Reina purchased a one-way trip to the Altaran islands just before the King’s death.”

“The Altaran islands?” I ask, racking my brains to try and place this name.

“They’re a remote island chain between the hidden territories and the royal continent,” Henry tells us, “so remote that all but the largest island are completely uninhabited. And the big island is only home to one thing: the most sacred temple known to shifters. It’s considered so hallowed that they don’t even allow pilgrimages to the site, only the most devout and worthy priests and priestesses are permitted to serve there.”

I press my hand to my racing heart, “so Reina wouldn’t be going there unless she intended to devote herself as a priestess.”

“Exactly,” Henry smiles, “and the fact that she was even allowed to go indicates that her journey was Goddess-blessed.”

“So how do we get there? How long will it take to reach the islands?” I ask, my blood feeling positively electric.

“You’ll have to go by ship.” Henry tells us with a small frown. “You can’t fly in the third trimester and I don’t even know if there’s access from the air. Reina traveled by boat, so you will too.” He pauses meaningfully, “I have to tell you that Dominic isn’t going to like it,

though. There aren't any doctors or hospitals, no resources to help you if you encounter trouble."

"Surely there can't be safer hands than the Goddess's," I counter, practically bouncing up and down. "How long is the journey?" I ask again.

Henry chuckles, "If I were you I would try to show a bit more hesitation about the risks when you talk to your mate. But it will take no more than three days."

"That's amazing!" I burst, giving up the pretense of calm and throwing my arms around my sister. "I can't believe you found her! I can't believe I'm going to meet her!"

Cora hugs me back, and I'm beyond moved when she murmurs, "I'm so happy for you, Elle."

"Henry, you should come with us!" I suggest, glowing with happiness. "You know Reina, and I couldn't ask for a better travel companion."

"Hey," Cora objects in an offended tone.

"Except for Cora, but she's already coming." I amend, batting my lashes at my disgruntled sister.

To my surprise, Henry's face falls. "Yes, I know Reina." He says in a strange voice. "But if I'm being honest I'm not particularly eager to renew the acquaintance."

At once I remember that my birth father is responsible for the death of Henry's mate. I don't have any idea if my mother was in on the plot, but it's entirely understandable why Henry would want to keep his distance. "Oh Henry, I'm sorry. That was thoughtless of me."

"Nonsense." He waves my apologies away, wheeling forward to kiss my cheek. "Besides, Dominic needs me here – as an advisor. He's already arranged for you to have plenty of protection and company, and I think he's worried about being short-staffed as a result." This is news to me and I don't entirely understand his meaning, but I can't bring myself to care right now.

"Have you told him the news yet?" I ask, secretly hoping that he has so that the duty doesn't fall to me.

"No," Henry grins, reading my sly expression. "That's up to you, little mother."

I nod, hugging him tightly. "Thank you so much, Henry."

3rd Person

Damon stomped into his war room, raking his gaze over the scale model of the various battle fronts spread out on the center table. He growled with barely contained frustration, quickly losing control and slashing his arm over the tiny wax figures dotting the Southern border.

His troops had just called to report yet another loss – and to the humans of all people. It was one thing to be routed by the shifter resistance forces, but it was an insult to grievous injury to be defeated by such inferior beings. The furious emperor was ready to murder his war council, convinced that they'd do about as much good to him as corpses as they currently served as advisors.

Ever since the secrecy pack broke the humans had been an unforeseen and shocking complication. Sure, the same clowns who'd recommended he send his best troops to the Western front had cautioned him about the fallout, but who would have ever believed those neanderthals could mount a competent defense against his elite forces? It seemed the weak creatures had been investing in advanced weapons systems for years without making the information public, and they hadn't hesitated to deploy them when faced with an existential threat.

For weeks Damon had been watching his forces dwindle beneath the two-pronged assaults of shifter and human armies – the only blessing was that the two sides had not united against their common enemy. Now, Damon didn't particularly care about the death of his men – a soldier was little more than cannon-fodder after all – he had plenty more where they came from. The far greater blow was the impossibility of governance amidst the sheer chaos of the collapsing societies. He couldn't get control of any town or city beyond Moon Valley, especially since he'd dismantled every institution and power structure that might impart order.

The fact of the matter was that Damon needed to put an end to the fighting and fast, or the continent he'd seized would be worthless by the time he finally established his rule. Moreover, he needed to do something about that bitch and Sinclair's unborn pup in Vanara. He was thrilled to have Sinclair out of the way, but his widow was still a source of hope for the downtrodden, and his pup would likely grow into an indomitable challenger if given the chance.

Damon had been trying to reinstate contact with his assassin in Vanara ever since Sinclair's death was confirmed, but the wolf seemed to be dodging his calls. Perhaps he'd discovered he enjoyed life in Vanara so much he didn't need Damon's favor any longer. But no matter the cause, Damon needed an ally in the hidden territories. His resources were so strained that he couldn't afford to deal with the refugees on the coast,

let alone get another spy over the border.

Instead he decided that it was time to take a page out of Sinclair's own book.

Before they lost contact, his spy had shared that the Storm Forest Alpha, Kieran, was fiercely opposed to allying with Sinclair. The Alpha clearly had more sense than some of his countrymen, as he understood that humans were worth little more than slave labor, and made no bones about sharing this perspective.

In fact, Damon actually felt a sense of solidarity with the fierce leader. He'd been harboring these thoughts in privacy for some time, but now it seemed as if things were becoming truly desperate. He couldn't continue to bear the burden of this fight alone. He'd thought Sinclair weak for seeking alliances, but perhaps the late wolf was more clever than he'd seemed.

It was time to make his move.

Damon found the phone number among his late father's documents, practically salivating as he dialed. Damon held his breath as the line rang, silently praying for Kieran to pick up.

At last the shrill ringing ended in a click, "Hello?" A gruff voice sounded on the other end of the line.

"Is this Alpha Kieran?" Damon asked, trying to keep the excitement from his voice.

"It is," the voice replied, sounding suspicious. "Whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?"

"This is Emperor Damon." He replied, relishing the sound of his new title. "I have an offer to make you – an opportunity to increase your power and protect your lands from the scourge of refugees and human scum."

Kieran contemplated this for a moment, but the suspicion was gone from his voice when he finally replied, replaced with avid interest. "I'm listening."

Chapter 244 – Sinclair Visits a War Zone

Ella

“Dominic, this isn’t fair, I want to come!” I’m staring down my mate as he pulls on his shoes, my arms crossed stubbornly over my chest. I have to fight to hide my yawn from him, as I’m barely awake. The sun isn’t even up yet, but Sinclair looks as alert and energetic as ever. His adrenaline is probably surging already, as he’s leading the summit delegations on an excursion to the embattled continent this morning.

My wolf is furious with Sinclair for ordering us to stay behind, even though I know I can’t fly now that I’m into my fifth month of pregnancy. The summit is as much my baby as it is my mate’s, and I don’t want to be left out on one of the most crucial events of the entire endeavor.

Not to mention that I want to go for our people as well, all the ones still languishing in fear and uncertainty about whether they’ll be able to escape. I want to help them, speak with them and learn their needs – to comfort them if it’s possible.

Audible Gift Memberships

Unfortunately Sinclair doesn’t look the least bit sympathetic. Last night I shared the news of my mother’s location with him, and he did not take it well. He shifted on the spot and went for a run, working through his feelings before finally returning and claiming me with all the ferocity he possessed. Afterwards he agreed to let me go, but he obviously wasn’t happy about it.

“Pout all you want, trouble. I’m not taking you into a war zone,” Sinclair declares sternly, “surely you realize how strongly I feel about this if I’m willing to let you out of my sight?”

He has a point. Ever since we decided that finding my mother was too urgent to delay, he’s been like my giant, furry shadow. His protective instincts are in such a state of overdrive that I’m reminded of the early days of my pregnancy, when he growled and snarled at anyone who so much as looked at me.

“But I should be there, people need to see that we’re in this together!” I insist, stomping my little foot before I can think better of it.

Sinclair arches a brow and unfurls his huge body from the edge of the bed, towering over me. He stares into my wide eyes for a few long moments, probing our mating bond and reading my wolf’s stress all too easily. I wish I could hide it from him, but I can’t seem to withdraw my gaze from his piercing scrutiny.

The truth is that underneath my genuine interest in the trip, there’s a churning sea of anxiety over the fact that he will be going into a war zone without me. My wolf hates this

more than anything, no matter how inevitable the eventuality.

Seeing this, Sinclair's foreboding expression softens to something unbearably tender. "This will be good practice, little mate." He murmurs, pulling me close. "Neither one of us likes it, but we're going to be separated one way or another. You have to find your mother, and I have to fight Damon." He sighs, kissing my temple. "The timing is terrible, but we can't control that. We just have to get through it."

"How?" I ask, in a voice so small I barely recognize it.

"By taking it one day at a time." Sinclair replies, sounding so steady and sure that it's hard to believe this is the same wolf who is currently sending waves of rabid possessiveness through our bond. "If we can just get through today then we'll be together again this evening. And when it comes time for you to leave, then we just have to remember that every day we're apart is one day closer to being reunited."

I nod, my throat feeling thick and scratchy. "I knew it was going to be hard... I just didn't realize it would be this hard. I mean, we've already done it once."

"I know, baby." He purrs, clutching me even tighter now. "But it's different this time... and it's for the best. I won't be able to focus on the refugees or the other Alpha's if you're with me, I'd be too worried about your safety to give them the attention they deserve."

He's right. I know he's right, but that's never been the problem.

"Okay, but if you're even one minute late coming back then I'm coming after you." I threaten sulkily, my voice muffled by his sweet-smelling chest.

"I won't be late," he promises, kissing my hair four times in quick succession. "You have my word, Ella. I'll be back before you know it."

Sinclair

When this war began I told myself that when I finally came home, it would be to defeat Damon once and for all.

It isn't easy to come to terms with the fact that I'm going to be returning to Vanara in only a few hours, especially not when I see the throngs of bodies clamoring to board the planes when we land. My family is a thousand miles away, which hurts to no end, but at least I know that I'm doing what's best for them no matter the distance. It feels different to turn my back on my people when they languish here alone, for how can I do what's best for them when I've escaped and they still live in fear?

As we disembark hundreds of wolves press around me, crying out with a mix of joy, relief and desperation. They beg for my help, cry out questions about my plans for the war, beseech me to overthrow Damon and pledge their lives to the struggle. It's all so overwhelming, and I'm not the only one who feels this way.

I can see the pain, concern and pity on the faces of every Alpha in my company, even those who haven't been particularly cooperative. There may only be a plane ride between these refugees and the ones they met in Vanara, but this experience feels entirely different. These people are not recovering, licking their wounds and trying to figure out what to do now that they're safe. These people are still in the throws of fight or flight, unsure whether or not they will live to see the sun rise again.

The scent of their fear is crushing, and I wonder at how James manages to do this every day – to know he can only save a few and pray that nothing happens to those he must leave behind. I rest a firm hand on his shoulder as the delegations spread through the crowds, listening to their stories with grave expressions. "I'm sorry I didn't come sooner." I confess to the soldier. "I want you to know how much I respect and appreciate the work you've been doing. If I hadn't been so determined to come back the right way I would have understood what you've been going through sooner."

"Alpha, that's your guilt talking." James replies simply. "These people are thrilled to see you, no doubt, but they know you can't be here and plan a war at the same time."

"He's right." A she-wolf chimes in. There are so many shifters surrounding us that private conversations are impossible, not that I mind. "Trust me, Alpha. We don't want you here every day."

"What do you want?" I ask, noticing a young boy leaning against her legs. "Is there anything I can do for you while I am here?"

"You can get us on one of those planes today." The she-wolf requests, a stark burst of vulnerability crossing her countenance. "We've been waiting three weeks."

I nod, unable to refuse them. "And you?" I ask the boy, "would you like to fly today?"

He peeks up at me with a confused frown, "Can my Daddy come with us?"

I glance at his mother, who kneels down beside him, "Finn, you know Daddy is fighting in the resistance. We've talked about this, honey."

He looks up at her unhappily, then turns his eyes to me, obviously hoping I might tell him otherwise. "I don' wanna go without Daddy."

"You're Daddy must be very proud of you," I tell him gently. "He'd have to trust you a lot to leave his mate in your protection. It's a very big job." I continue solemnly. "And I'm sure he misses you every bit as much as you miss him, but I think he'd want you to get your Mommy to safety, since he can't be here to do it himself. She's in your care until he returns, after all."

The boy looks up at me with wide eyes, his chest puffing up with pride as he reaches for his mother's hand. "Come on then, Mommy. We should get you on the plane before it's all full."

The she-wolf mouths a tearful thank you at me as they depart and I feel a split second of warmth as I watch them move towards the aircraft, but it's quickly replaced with a fresh barrage of guilt and helplessness as more shifters rush forward, eager to gain the same privilege. I know I've opened the floodgates, but I can't bring myself to regret helping those two. I want to help as many as I can, but it's hard to hear individual stories with so many voices competing to be heard.

"Please, I have pups!" One woman cries.

"My grandson is injured, we need help!" An elderly wolf counters, waving his arms.

It goes on and on, breaking my heart. "What will happen if we stay?" "How much longer before the usurper comes after us?" "The humans are getting closer by the day!"

"The human armies?" I clarify, zeroing in on this surprising news and wondering why my spies haven't reported such movements.

"No, sir. I mean the human refugees. The camps started small but the governments aren't helping so they're incredibly disorganized. The more numerous they become, the closer they come to encroaching on us." The same man responds.

"Are you telling me that there are human refugee camps near here?" I demand, stunned by this news and feeling as though I'm completely incompetent for not learning of this sooner.

"Yes Alpha," The man confirms hesitantly, clearly confused by my sharp tone. "There's one only three miles from this spot."

"Take me." I command, "now."

Chapter 245 – Human Camps

Sinclair

I don't depart for the human refugee settlement alone. I take every Alpha I can find, but I take special care to rope in Kieran. The wolf has been shooting me subversive glances since we arrived. He's been perfectly attentive to the shifter refugees, but it's almost as though he's angry I'm making him care about them – that I'm confronting him with their pain.

It's a short trip to the human camps, and we promised the pilots we would return by the scheduled departure time. This only leaves us about an hour to actually get a sense of the situation. Before we arrived I was worried this wouldn't be enough time – afterwards I realize it was too much. The scene is so overwhelming, so distressing that even a few minutes amidst the chaos is overwhelming.

Audible Gift Memberships

If we'd believed that the plight of shifter refugees was grave, it's nothing compared to that of the humans. After all, the shifters understand why their lives have fallen to ruin, the humans are completely in the dark, and they're not coping well.

We hear the camp before we see it. This isn't much surprise with our supernatural hearing, but the sounds that float to us through the forest are not the desperate cries of people in need. It sounds like a battle.

Eventually we reach the crest of a hill overlooking the sprawling camps – if they can even be called camps. "Holy Goddess." Gabriel says beside me, his dark skin going remarkably pale.

A vast field of black and blue tarps sit in deep mud, propped up on shabby poles and sticks. They're supposed to be tents, but they look more like the squalid dwellings often built by those experiencing homelessness in large cities. The ramshackle structures are on the verge of collapse, and there is no sign of any food or fresh water. The stench is incredible, and it's immediately apparent that there is no one governing this place.

The disconsolate cries of women and children rise through the air in a miserable symphony, while the voices of angry men explode in violent shouts. It seems like there's movement everywhere, but none of it is positive or productive. There are fights breaking out every few feet, people lashing out over the last piece of fire wood, or accusing one another of thefts and attacks.

Utter dread fills me as I wait for the inevitable castigations from the other Alphas. And you want us to bring these wretches into our world? I imagine Kieran saying, with disdain dripping from his tongue. A crash sounds in the distance, and terrified screams break out

as the humans whip around, searching for the source of the disturbance. It's coming from the Northern mountains— the opposite direction of the shifter camps – and it sounds like nothing more than a rock slide. However to their ears it must sound like an incoming army, and their fear is so potent my heart aches.

“I've never seen anything so...” Callahan begins, trailing off before he can find the right word.

“Hopeless.” Of all the members in our party, Kieran is the very last man I expected to find an ounce of empathy for these people. Still, the pain and concern in his voice is clear, and I find myself even more on edge than before. I can't make sense of his behavior today. One moment he's so tense and on edge, looking around at the other summit attendees with such suspicion and distrust that I wonder what on earth is going through his head. The next moment he's acting as though he actually has a heart, and I don't trust it for one moment. Something is going on with him, whether this latest show of emotion is to throw us off the trail, or he's internally overcompensating for his treachery. I have a terrible feeling that Kieran has not only made his decision about where to pledge his alliance in this war, but that he's chosen the opposition.

Ella

He's late. The lying fink promised me! But here we are five minutes after the designated landing time and the airfield is completely devoid of planes.

“Something's wrong.” I fret, looking back and forth between Henry and Isabel, eager for their perspectives.

“They probably just got caught in a headwind.” Henry answers, squeezing my hand. “Flight timetables are an estimate, not an exact science.”

I gnaw nervously on my lower lip, focusing on Isabel. Surely she'll support me, I think, with James away as well. “They did radio when they departed the coast.” She reminds me, the traitor! “We have no reason to think anything has gone awry.”

My wolf grumbles mutinously in my head, and I'm already wracking my brains for some way to go after my missing mate. There aren't any planes left here in the capital – at least, not any that belong to the King. “Do many Vanaran citizens own private planes?” I ask curiously, trying to keep my voice innocent.

“Don't even think about it.” Philippe growls from behind me. “For my sake if not your own. Dominic will kill me if I let you anywhere near an aircraft.”

“Let me?” I mutter under my breath, my wolf roiling against the idea that anyone but Sinclair should give us orders. “I ought to— look!” I exclaim, interrupting my own train of thought as a dot appears on the horizon, zooming towards us.

“There, you see?” Henry chuckles, “they’re just running a little behind.”

The wait is much easier then, but still frustrating. The delegation isn’t on the first, second or third transports to land, and I realize my noble mate probably waited until everyone else had departed before taking off himself. Finally the last plane taxis over the field, coming to a stop mere meters away. The cargo door starts to descend before the plane has even finished moving, and then Sinclair is there, bounding out onto the pavement.

I throw myself into his open arms, feeling every muscle in my overwrought body finally relax. “Seven minutes, Dominic!” I tell him furiously. “You are seven whole minutes late!”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” He breathes against my ear, squeezing me so tightly I think I might burst. “But I’m here now.” He purrs, “I’m here.”

I pull back only far enough to kiss him, tears of relief stinging my eyes. Sinclair hungrily takes my mouth, and he lets his power pour off of him in heady waves. The wolves around us shrink back at the force, but my own inner canine only swoons. I don’t understand why he’s unleashed his full strength on the airfield, but I’m too caught up in the delicious feel of him to care at this moment. It goes on and on, until everyone around us retreats to the intake tents. Even James and Isabel, who were trying to pretend they didn’t want to be wrapped around each other in precisely this way, eventually slip away hand in hand.

It’s not until later, when we’re alone in our rooms, that he explains himself. First he tells me of the human camps, which devastates and horrifies me in equal measure. It’s easy to understand why he would feel so on edge, and as terrible as it sounds I wish that was all there was to his temper. Instead he explains about the Storm Forest Alpha’s most recent offenses. “Kieran was acting very odd today.” He confesses, sprawled naked beside me in bed. “On edge, cagey, even after the danger had passed and we were on our way back. It set off alarm bells in my mind, so I wanted to remind him of exactly who he’s dealing with – just in case.”

“Then you mean it wasn’t for me?” I pout, my body still flushed from his thorough loving.

“Not entirely.” He grins wolfishly, caressing my belly. “I knew you’d enjoy it and I wanted to let go for my own sake, but I also needed to send him a message.”

“Well it worked.” I assure him. “You should have seen the looks on their faces when they first felt it?”

“Should I take that to mean you were looking at other wolves while I was kissing you?” Sinclair growls playfully, making me squirm with renewed heat.

“I was just curious.” I shrug, blushing. “Besides, my wolf liked seeing all those big tough Alphas run away with their tails between their legs.” I admit, rubbing my body against him.

“Oh?” He inquires, eyes glinting.

I nod eagerly, unable to hide the sensual pleasure in my voice. “They looked like children compared to you.”

“Now you’re just flattering me.” He teases, kissing my nose. “And if you keep this up then we’re going to get distracted and end up late for dinner – which we can’t afford. Not with Kieran acting so shifty and the summit coming to an end tomorrow.”

My desire is immediately banked. “You think he might betray us?”

Sinclair grimaces, “I think he’s hiding something... and we need to find out what it is. We don’t have much time left.”

Chapter 246 – Kieran Shares Something Unexpected

Ella

Dinner is a tense affair. I wish I could say it's clear whether or not our efforts with this summit are paying off, but all of these Alphas play their cards so close to their chests – well, all except Kieran. The Storm Forest Alpha spends the evening glaring at everyone around him, even his own men.

I'm beginning to think that there isn't any way for us to win him over and that we should focus our attention elsewhere – on the Alpha's we can form alliances with. Still, I understand that excluding him might make his animosity towards our cause even greater.

Audible Gift Memberships I ponder my conversation with Sinclair, wondering if Kieran is actively betraying us. Has he told Damon that my mate still lives? Is he planning on helping him attempt another assassination?

I don't believe he cares about people beyond his pack or perhaps beyond Vanara, but I didn't believe he was stupid. It's one thing to refuse to join forces with us, and another entirely to make a suicide pact with a madman – for that's surely what joining Damon would mean.

Of course, I've been wrong before. Sinclair believes he's hiding something, and I have to admit the Alpha's behavior is suspect. So my only mission tonight is to persuade Kieran to come clean, and I know exactly how I'm going to do it.

I start with simple observation, knowing just how uncomfortable persistent and unwanted attention can be to one with a guilty conscience. I don't hide the fact that I'm watching him. Every time Kieran looks up and finds my eyes on him, I stare with the same expression I've always used for misbehaving children. It's not threatening or cold, rather deliberate and dismayed. It says: I know what you've done and I'm already disappointed, don't make things worse by lying to me.

I begin sprinkling bait into my conversations as well, which isn't difficult when all the delegates want to debrief about their excursion today. "It was absolutely sickening." The Black Alder is saying next to me. "I've never seen so many people in so much pain." He's looking at me with wide eyed sincerity, eager to hear my perspective. They all are – being a child of the Goddess has its benefits.

"And to think the person inflicting all that horror is the one who is meant to protect them." I sigh, shaking my head sadly. "It's the worst kind of betrayal. What kind of Alpha could possibly stomach harming so many shifters, let alone those in his care?"

"But it wasn't only shifters!" The Silver Dawn Alpha pipes up. "The human settlements

were even worse.”

I pretend like this is news to me, though my pain and outrage over the details they share are completely genuine. “You see, this is why we have to stop thinking about our peoples as separate. Damon doesn’t care who he hurts, and if some of us suffer then we all do.

If we only help the shifters and leave the humans behind, then those settlements you saw today will only grow. The people will see that we only care for our own kind – they will see us prosper while they languish, and they will hate us for it.” I scan the faces around me, taking my attention off of Kieran only long enough to argue my case.

“When I first learned about shifters, Dominic explained to me that he doesn’t lead because he wants to. He does it because his power is a grave responsibility – he has the strength to spare, so he’s obligated to lend it to those in need. This is the same principle.

Vanara has the power and strength that all those beings fleeing the war, and everyone who remains trapped under Damon’s thumb, lack.” Sinclair has one arm slung over the back of my chair, and his fingers trace circles on my upper arm, encouraging me to continue.

“It is an incredible privilege to be able to choose whether or not to enter this conflict. And it would be easy to say it’s not your problem, but if your life is easy and prosperous while the rest of the world wages war...” I trail off, sounding forlorn. “Well I just can’t find any honor in that.” I return my full focus to my true target, pleased to see the Storm Forest Alpha listening intently. “And what good is an Alpha without honor? Without loyalty to a higher cause than his own self-interest?”

Kieran, who has been turning increasingly red while I make my speech, surges up from the table. “Fine damn you!” He bursts, throwing down his napkin. His movement is so abrupt that his chair falls back and clatters against the marble floor, adding violent emphasis to his outburst.. A hush falls over the room, and I’m infinitely pleased this is a private dinner rather than a public feast. Sinclair glowers at the other wolf, a deep growl rumbling in his chest.

I rest a steadying hand on his leg, keeping my posture relaxed. “It’s okay.” I soothe, trying to gentle his worth. “I’d like to hear anything Alpha Kieran has to say... or confess.”

The man in question narrows his eyes at me, outrage and indignance pouring off of him in waves. “Ohh you’re too clever for your own good, you know that?” He grumbles – it does not sound like a compliment.

"I've been told." I tell him, smiling serenely.

Kieran shakes his head, clenching his fists. "I wasn't going to share this," He begins furiously. "But now I see I have no alternative." He's silent for almost half a minute, and the quiet drags on interminably. Eventually Kieran seems to find the right words, "Yesterday I returned to my rooms to find an anonymous electronic message waiting, including a video link and a note advising me to follow it if I cared about the future of Vanara. When I did so, I discovered that Damon was waiting on the other end."

The other Alphas begin muttering amongst each other, and Kieran huffs in frustration. "I didn't announce this for precisely this reason. You're all already preparing to condemn me!"

I raise my hand, urging the other wolves to quiet. "No one is condemning you. Please tell us what happened."

Kieran scowls, and I'm sure he's cursing my name in his head. "He offered me an alternative alliance." He explains fiercely, not taking his eyes from me. "He said that he needed someone to help ensure Sinclair's bloodline ended once and for all, and that he could use ground support to thwart the humans and the resistance fighters on the royal continent. He was confident that once these challenges were overcome, We would be primed to turn our attention to Sevka and Vanara."

Now the hush in the dining rooms is completely voluntary, as many of the delegates gape in surprise. "Dominic was right. Damon isn't going to be satisfied with controlling one land, his appetite for power is infinite. He spoke of a worldwide empire, and he tried to bribe me by offering your crown, Gabriel." Kieran confesses, looking suddenly ill. "He said he would reward my loyalty to his cause by putting me in charge of Vanara – that this was the only way I would ever sit upon the throne."

We're all waiting with baited breath, beyond curious to hear how Kieran responded to this offer. "I questioned his strategy. You see, I thought he might tell me some of his plans to prove he could fulfill the promises he was making.

I wanted to know what his vision of the future was, and how he was going to achieve it. In return he lashed out. He called me a coward and a... little bitch. He said I was as bad as a she-wolf, nagging and questioning his ability when he'd just offered me the world on a platter."

Kieran is growing visibly more irate with every word, his cheeks positively crimson now. "He called me every insulting name he could think of and he ended the meeting when I refused to commit to an alliance."

The Alpha averts his gaze to the ground. "Then today... this afternoon my chief of staff

called to inform me that I'd received an express package by special courier. Apparently it was full of dresses, diapers and self help books on how to be a real man."

It's a good thing that Kieran can't seem to look us in the eye, because I slap my hand over my mouth to smother the shocked laugh attempting to bubble up inside of me. I glance at Roger, whose lips are visibly twitching as he fights his own humor.

"I know it was from Damon." Kieran announces angrily, and I'm certain only the grace of the Goddess keeps my face straight. "He's trying to bully me into betraying you all. But I will never join such a wolf." He turns his gaze on Sinclair now, looking contrite.

"I did not reveal to him that you are still alive, Dominic. I did not share any of the progress we've made here." He sucks in a deep breath. "I should have told you about the offer as soon as I received it. But after seeing those camps today, after learning just how dishonorable our enemy is... I've made my decision. My allegiance is yours."

Chapter 247 – To War

Ella

I'm dying. The strength and determination it requires to stay serious in the face of Kieran's announcement is staggering. I want nothing more than to roll on the floor laughing, but something tells me that doing so would undermine this victory.

Audible Gift Memberships

I can feel Sinclair's mirth through our bond, though he looks as cool and intimidating as ever. You brilliant, devious, glorious little minx! His voice sounds in my mind, full of all the laughter missing from his face.

I send him an elated giggle in return. The only thing better than getting to see how embarrassed he is by that delivery, is knowing that Damon is getting the blame. I share, my pulse racing with excitement. You notice Kieran didn't tell him no? He asked about strategy and 'didn't commit', but he never refused him... how much do you want to bet he was genuinely considering the option before getting so mercilessly insulted?

I know. Sinclair confirms, positively glowing with pride. I think your prank just stole a powerful ally right out from under Damon's nose, trouble. I have no doubt Kieran was tempted and just needed to confirm it was a safe bet... but he'll never work with Damon now.

No wonder he was in such an odd mood today. I reflect, wishing this dinner would end so we can go celebrate.

I can sense Sinclair preparing to stand and thank Kieran for his allegiance, to deliver a speech inspiring the other pack leaders to make their own pledges. The momentum is on our side, and Kieran was our most difficult sell – if he's on board it's only a matter of time for the others to join as well. We can both feel that this is the opportunity we've been waiting for, the perfect time to go big or go home.

However before Sinclair can move, the FrostFang Alpha stands as well. "I admit, I have my opinions about the way you handled this, Kieran." He begins, giving the other wolf a piercing look. "But I cannot fault the conclusion at which you have arrived. I was inclined to lend my support to this effort from the beginning, but this week has surpassed anything I could have imagined."

His gaze swings to me, "Ella, your wisdom and grace – your compassion for all those affected by Damon's violence and greed – is an inspiration. You are living evidence of the Goddess's wishes for our future, but you are more than that too, because I'm certain that you would never join an unworthy cause. To oppose you would be to oppose justice, and I have no wish to betray my values that way."

The Alpha forges on, turning now to Sinclair. “Dominic, I have always admired your dedication to your people, as well as your unflagging principles. But meeting you, seeing your strength and feeling the magnitude of your power first hand, has been a humbling and heartening experience. I’m certain I have never, and will never, meet another wolf of your caliber – unless perhaps it is your son.”

He allows with a genial smile, nodding to my round tummy. “You have never sought to pressure or manipulate us despite the urgency of your campaign, you have only worked to educate us about the threat Damon poses, and allowed us to bear witness to the events on the ground.”

“You have done very well. Because even if I did not feel so warmly towards you and your Luna, the things we have seen and the stories we have heard over the last few days would have been more than enough to convince me to oppose the usurper.”

His countenance hardens as he surveys the other pack leaders, many of whom are nodding in agreement. “Any wolf who would cause his people such torment is not fit to lead. Any Alpha who would risk the existence of all shifters by breaking the secrecy pact – who has overturned our way of life for the last thousand years – cannot be allowed to gain power.

And any King whose avarice is so great that he cannot be content with a single empire, will turn on his allies as soon as his enemies are defeated. And when that time comes, there won’t be anyone left to help those who stood with him.”

The FrostFang Alpha is clearing gearing up for a big finish, his volume rising with his passion. “We saw Damon’s vision for the future today in revolting detail, and I for one have no intention of letting him spread that nightmare any farther than he’s already managed. We must do whatever is in our power to defeat him, so I too pledge my allegiance to Dominic and Ella, and I charge any Alpha who would refuse to do the same as a traitor.”

Cheers and growls of agreement rise up around the table as the other Alphas stand one by one, each wolf declaring his commitment to defeating Damon. Soon Sinclair, Gabriel, Roger, Henry and I are the only ones seated, and I think we’re all a little surprised by the sudden wave of support. I suppose this has been building all along and it’s just been difficult to read because of their expert poker faces, but then again, maybe today was a turning point?

Maybe even the hardest of hearts cannot stand before such suffering and remain unmoved. Maybe they were waiting for Kieran to choose a side first, so that they wouldn’t be alone if they refused to help... maybe a simple and diabolical prank accomplished what no words ever could.

“Well damn,” Sinclair observes, smiling broadly. “I thought I was going to have to make a speech. You kind of stole my thunder, Ethan.” The group laughs heartily, and Sinclair gracefully rises, buttoning his suit jacket as he raises his glass. “I must admit I’m incredibly moved by your support. I’m infinitely grateful to have your allegiance, and I vow that I will do everything in my power to honor your sacrifices and live up to your expectations.” He squeezes my hand, and I can feel pure love rushing through our bond.

“I have always considered this war to be so much bigger than us – than our pack and our people. I wish that wasn’t the case. I wish that Damon was not the monster he is, that he was not such a threat.

I wish that he hadn’t cost us all the lives he’s stolen and destroyed.” Sinclair’s eyes are shining now, and I send him a flood of encouragement, needing to overwhelm his guilt with support. “But I could not wish for better allies than the wolves in this room, and I promise to never take you, or your people for granted.

My hope is for our refugees to leave your shores one day soon, but I assure you that even after we are gone, we will never forget the kindness and support you have shown us. We will never be able to repay you for your generosity, and you will always have friends on the Royal Continent.”

Gabriel stands too now, raising his own glass. “To our alliance – to ridding the world of Damon, and building the future the Goddess envisioned for us when she brought this wonderful she-wolf into the world.” He smiles, gesturing to me.

The others echo his toast, and I steal a single sip of Sinclair’s wine to seal the verbal agreement we’ve all made. I can’t wait to go back to our rooms and talk about all of this, but my mate isn’t finished yet. He turns to the Storm Forest Alpha, a lethal expression on his handsome face. “Kieran, did you ever tell Damon whether you would join him – one way or another?”

The wolf in question flushes again. “No, but I swear on my mate’s life, my allegiance is yours.”

“Oh no, I believe you.” Sinclair reassures him, “I was actually thinking that there might be an opportunity for us to infiltrate the enemy camp. I have spies on the ground of course, even a few who have won prominent roles in his employ. But Damon needs more fighters, I’m sure he wants your army and it could be very advantageous for us to have a double agent commanding his reinforcements.”

“You’re saying that you want me to go back to him and accept?” Kieran clarifies.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Sinclair confirms, a devious glint in his eye. “Tell him

you thought about it and decided that the Vanaran throne is worth the risk, but you want to be intimately involved in his war planning efforts if your own men's lives are going to be on the line. Pretend you're on his side, collect whatever intelligence you can, undermine his plans whenever possible, and set your soldiers against his when the time comes for battle." He pins the Alpha in his crosshairs, practically daring him to refuse. "Are you up for it?"

Kieran levels him with a blazing look, filled with bloodlust and an unmistakable thirst for vengeance against the wolf who insulted him so badly. "It would be my pleasure."

Chapter 248 – Decisions

Sinclair

What started as a regular dinner party quickly evolves into a marathon planning session for the war, extending late into the night. I summoned James and my top enforcers as soon as the alliance was confirmed, because even though we've just clinched a major victory, the truth is that the hardest work is still ahead of us. In addition to coordinating Kieran's mission as a double agent, there are a lot of logistics to sort out in terms of mobilizing combat forces and choosing tactical strategies.

In hindsight I realize I should have familiarized the delegations with the military minutiae from the beginning, but I hadn't wanted to risk compromising classified information without confirming their loyalties first. Now I'm paying the price of that caution, as there's a great deal of ground to cover simply to get everyone caught up on the same page.

Still, I'm elated to have the combined armies of the Vanaran packs at our disposal. In addition to the resistance forces coalescing back home, our numbers should now be more than double the soldiers employed in Damon's imperial army – and that's not to mention the Vanaran technologies we'll now be able to employ.

Audible Gift Memberships

Everything is finally coming together, and I'd be lying if I said I don't feel entirely impatient to launch our first true attack. Ella is helping me remain patient, simply by the virtue of my wolf refusing to be separated from her any sooner than we've already planned.

It's a good thing too, because I know rushing home in a fiery rage is a recipe for disaster. We have to put ourselves in our opponents shoes; get inside Damon's mind and anticipate his every move, then account for each potential complication until we have a protocol for every contingency.

Ella is barely awake by the time we finally finish discussing our next steps. I tried to convince her to go up to bed an hour ago, but she only climbed into my lap and dug her proverbial paws in. I didn't have the heart to set her away from me, and I figured there was a better chance of her sleeping with me than without me. I'm not even sure she's aware when we decide to call it a night.

I carry the drowsy bundle up to our suite, pangs of tenderness radiating through my chest every time she emits a sleepy murmur and snuggles closer, burying her face in the curve of my neck. I try my best to undress Ella without disturbing her slumber, but it's no use.

She blinks up at me with heavy-lidded eyes as I slide her dress down over her hips, one

small hand extending towards my face. I pause so she can stroke my jaw, wondering if there's ever been such a sweet mate before, then deciding such a thing is impossible.

"I'm so proud of you." She utters, her speech only slightly slurred. "You were brilliant tonight, Dominic."

"You were the brilliant one." I reply, kissing her palm and finally pulling the gown from her delectable body. "You played Kieran like a fiddle, and you had every other wolf in that room hanging on your every word."

"I just lured them in, you're the one who they've chosen to follow." She replies, summoning a beatific smile. "All those big tough wolves deferring to your strength, anxiously awaiting your directions and guidance, even above their own King's? That's not nothing, my love." Her silken voice is low and husky, her gold eyes limpid pools. I know, even without scenting her arousal, that my little wolf found no shortage of excitement in watching me take charge of that room.

"Oh?" I croon, slipping her heels from her poor, swollen feet. I begin massaging the soles, and Ella moans in relief as my knuckles knead her sore muscles. "So my little troublemaker enjoyed seeing me boss everyone around, hmm?"

She flushes and giggles softly, but her face is solemn when she continues. "I'm serious. It's a testament to just how much they respect you – we couldn't ask for a higher endorsement." Ella smiles again, lighting up my whole world. "It's why you deserve to be King... wherever you go, the most powerful shifters bend the knee of their own free will. You don't use threats or intimidation, you simply walk the walk and they fall in line." She muses, "It's very impressive."

I know Ella is expressing genuine admiration – that she wants to make sure I take credit for this accomplishment – but I'm feeling much too triumphant for thoughtful reflections. My wolf wants to celebrate, and what better way could there be to mark this occasion than playing with our mate?

"So it didn't turn you on?" I tease, sliding my hand up her velvety thigh and pulling aside the sodden gusset of her panties. Ella shudders as my fingers connect with her needy sex, sinking right into her slick folds. "This sweet pussy is certainly dripping – do you mean to tell me it's not for me?"

"It's always for you." Ella answers breathily, her voice catching when my thumb finds her sensitive clit. "Only you can do this to me, Dominic." I might think she's simply going along with the subject change to please me, except that I can feel just how profoundly my touch addles her thoughts, derailing anything she might have wanted to say next.

I purr with barely restrained pleasure, my cock going rock hard before Ella is even

finished speaking. "Very good." I praise, pulling away the last of her undergarments. Her eyes dip to the hard member between my legs, and my wolf howls through our bond when she licks her lips as if the mere sight has made her salivate. I'm still lazily petting her most intimate flesh, drinking in every tiny sound and movement she makes as the feelings wash over her.

Ella is perfectly alert now, but I cease touching her when her eyes fall shut. "Are you sure you're not too tired for this, little mate?" I ask, eyes narrowed in concern. "We just go to sleep if you are."

Her eyes snap open. "No, I'm awake." She answers, responding so quickly I have to smother a smile.

I don't budge my stern expression, and Ella's pupils dilate with obvious desire, "Prove it, baby." I instruct her, making my voice as deep as possible. "Don't take your eyes off of me for even a moment. If you do, everything stops. I want to see you come to pieces for me."

She gulps and nods, gnawing on her plump lower lip as she waits for me to continue stroking her. I don't disappoint, and soon the only sounds in the room are Ella's ecstatic whimpers and my rumbles of pure satisfaction.

The next morning we both find it difficult to believe the summit has reached a successful conclusion, before the scheduled events have even been completed. Of course, Ella also doesn't know that tonight's ball is going to double as our surprise mating ceremony, and though my mind is finding it difficult to think of anything else, hers is still sharply focused on politics.

"I was thinking," Ella says, leaning back against my chest and trailing her hands through the sea of bubbles filling our bath. "We ought to focus some efforts on encouraging Damon's men to turn against him. Not his top advisors or anything, but the footsoldiers in his army. They're being ordered to commit atrocities and some of them might not have a problem following those commands, but I have to think that others are waiting for any opportunity to desert."

"That's a good thought." I nod in approval. "We've had quite a few reports of imperial soldiers joining the resistance already, but if we offer amnesty to the rest then we might be able to incentivize more wolves to change sides."

"The only thing I don't like about it is that they shouldn't need an incentive to betray a leader as dishonorable as Damon." Ella sighs, "if anything turning traitor is a sign of virtue."

“It’s not that simple.” I remind her, though I know she doesn’t need it. “Warriors are taught to follow orders no matter what, many have no way out, and the penalty for dereliction of duty is execution. Too many of those wolves have families to support, it makes taking the risk untenable.”

“You wouldn’t commit war crimes even if the cost was your life.” Ella counters, sounding rather petulant.

“Not my life.” I confirm, “but if it might cost me you or Rafe? If my death meant abandoning you in a world like the one Damon has created?”

“You would find another way.” Ella insists, leveling an adorable glare at me over her shoulder.

“I would try to find any alternative I could, but none of us ever know how far we’d go to protect the people we love until we’re put to the test. I know myself well enough to understand that I’m capable of doing terrible things if I feel like I have no other choice.” I exhale heavily, thinking about the future now. “Besides, when this war is over all of these shifters are going to have to find a way to go back to living side by side with those their former enemies. We can’t imprison everyone... we’re going to need compassion and empathy then more than ever.”

Ella frowns, “but we can’t just smooth over atrocities.” She reasons, “We can’t tell people to kiss, make up and pretend like it never happened – like they weren’t traumatized or they didn’t lose loved ones and livelihoods.”

“We won’t.” I promise. “But justice doesn’t necessarily mean punishment. Everyone caught up in this mess is merely trying to survive, however they can. We will all have committed offenses against other shifters and humans by the time this is over.” I run my hand over her belly, smiling as Rafe kicks against my palm. “That’s why we need you so much, Ella. I can kill Damon, but I can’t heal our peoples from wounds that run so deep. You’re the only person I know who has that power – just look at what you did for me and Roger. Look at what you’ve overcome yourself.”

Her lashes fall shut as the gravity of my words sink in. “That’s a really big job for one woman, you know.”

“I know.” I murmur, kissing her neck. “But I believe in you. And this little munchkin believes in you.” Rafe kicks in agreement, and I scent the faintest hint of tears. “Now let’s not talk about this any more today.” I suggest, “We have way too much to do.”

“I thought the only event today was the ball?” Ella asks, confused. “That’s hours and hours away.”

I offer her my most wolfish grin, "Well my beauty, you thought wrong."

Chapter 249 – Surprise

Ella

“Cora, what the hell is going on? I demand, staring at my sister in shock and indignation. She has just broken into my suite and announced that I will not be wearing the dress that Did especially for tonight’s ball. She pulled the hanger out of my closet and threw the laundry bag aside, as if the dress inside wasn’t the same the most expensive piece of clothing any of us have ever had.

“Just put on your bathrobe and sit down. The makeup artist arrives at any minute. Cora replies, with a devious and utterly unrepentant smile on her face. ” She’s moving around my dressing room, pulling up a chair in front of the dressing table.”, making room by moving boxes and suitcases.

She moves around the room as if she owns the place. Normally, I wouldn’t mind that – since my sister is welcome to anything that’s mine – It’s his sneaky demeanor and knowledgeable looks that are driving me to distraction.

“Makeup artist? ” I repeat, horrified. I gave up trying to follow her frantic movements, knowing I couldn’t keep up with her and that she wouldn’t stop even if I tried. “What are you talking about? I’m perfectly capable of doing my own makeup. ”

“Sure you can, but there’s nothing wrong with pampering a little once in a while. when . ” My sister replies, not giving me any more information about her strange behavior .

She starts rummaging through my shoe rack, seeming to eliminate a number of options with a single look, including the heels I bought specifically for this event. I’m about to demand answers once more when the door opens and a new voice joins the confusion .

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“Don’t forget the hairdressers! Elizabeth sings, entering without warning and carrying three heavy-looking bags. “They want to start rolling it up before the makeup team takes over. Obviously she could hear our conversation before she arrived, and obviously she’s involved in whatever that plot is.

“Okay, stop! I cry, throwing my hands out in protest. The two women stop halfway, looking at me with Expressions of expectation . “One of you needs to tell me what’s going on, right now. ” I order firmly, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Don’t worry, she’s never gotten along with surprises. ” Cora says to Isabel in a somewhat conspiratorial tone , as if I not even being here. Luckily she turns to me a second later, “Ella, everything you need Knowing is that there has been a small change of plans and we are here to ensure that everything run well . _ ”

“What a change of plans! I exploded, feeling more frustrated by the minute. “I’ve been planning this ball for weeks! I know all the details about the logistics , the decoration and the environment, the food ! I personally approved each __ item on the menu, each flower going to the arrangements of Flowers – I’d know if anything had changed. Do you realize that I have teams of people working on this? You can’t just come in and change things at the last minute. ”

“Take a deep breath, dear. ” Elizabeth says, hanging the bags that weigh on her. ___ ” It’s not last minute, we’ve been working on this for days. Also, Dominic doesn’t want you stressed, he’s just trying to do something good For you . ”

I gawk, cradling my belly. My first instinct is to laugh in their face if they think some days is time Enough to make big adjustments in this kind of event, but my wolf is more focused in the second half of Elizabeth’s statement. “Did Dominic arrange this? ”

“Well, technically we organized that. ” Cora corrects me, all smiling. “But we did it at his behest. We’re just fulfilling your wishes. Now calm down – if and try to have fun. ” __

As soon as I hear that my cowardly companion is behind this scheme, my wolf immediately cools down. __ My shoulders drop as the tension coursing through my body abruptly dissipates , disappearing as quickly as it emerged. If Sinclair is responsible, I know I’ll like this surprise. At the same time, my mind is spinning with questions. I’m not sure where he is at the moment, but I reach out to him anyway. What are you doing? I ask suspiciously.

He must be close, because as soon as the message comes out of my head , his cozy laugh fills my senses. You’ll see, problem. Are you being a good girl and letting Cora and Isabel take care of you?_

You mean your evil minions? I snort, they’re taking great pleasure in fooling me , in fact they’re just asking towards be bitten . No biting, little wolf. Sinclair warns, his tone sounding too forgiving for me to take seriously.

My wolf grumbles rebelliously, a new thought arises then. If Sinclair is responsible for this twist, perhaps he is the one who should pay the price . ” What about you?” “She asks mischievously, can I bite you?” _

Maybe later. He laughs, and I don’t try to hide my disappointment. “We’ll be together soon.” “For now relax – I promise you’ll enjoy this surprise.

My wolf is still muttering curses in my head when the makeup and hair crews arrive. They slide inside carrying sophisticated boxes of supplies, all with bright smiles and talking in a tone so loud that his words border on squeals. they’re allclearly very excited,

but no one is going to tell me what's going to be happening and it's driving me absolutely crazy.

I sit patiently as my hair is curly in meticulous detail, staring to anyone and everyone who looks in my direction. I have to get up twice during the session to go relieve the bladder, but Soon my reflection is more glamorous than ever. My golden pink hair is entwined in intricate braids wrapping around my head while long Curly locks float around my face. The effect is ethereal and charming, especially when they start adding pins with pearls true .

My makeup is impressive but understated, leaning heavily on my charms Natural , instead of painting them . Smoky shadows form seductive patterns under my well-carved eyebrows, and onyx paint is spread over my long lashes, making my golden irises glow. _in bright contrast . My fair skin is virtually untouched, with just a touch of blush on my apples of protruding face and a pink lipstick over my fleshy lips.

Cora and Isabel come to admire the finished product, and I notice that they are both using it matching emerald dresses. "You look amazing. My sister smiles, shaking my hand.

"It's true ," Elizabeth confirms with the typical indifferent air. "In fact, it's annoying that someone is allowed to be so beautiful. Maybe we should undo some of that – it might cause a ruckus. "

" She's not going to cause a ruckus. " Cora laughs, shaking her head. " But Dominic can when he sees you. "

"And we haven't even put on her dress yet. " Elizabeth smiles. _

"What a dress! "I demand," how can you have made another dress without that Do I give it a try? I exclaim, gesturing to the full length of my body. While my breasts and belly bore the brunt of the growing pains in the first two trimesters of my pregnancy, the third is showing me how nothing is safe from change. My hips are widening, my ass has a lot of extra padding , up my feet seem to have grown. "I balloon another inch good morning, whatever is in that bag doesn't will fit! "

"Honestly, Ella. Elizabeth rolls her eyes. "Do you think we're complete amateurs? The seamstress has been at it since the beginning. " _ _ _ _ _took a test for her ball gown, she took out duplicate measurements for the royal dress. "

My jaw drops as I look back and forth between these women, "Who are you! " _ _ _ _ _
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"So, you love spy movies." Cora replies, ignoring me again. _

“If one of you doesn’t start talking, I’m going to lose my temper . “I warn you,” and losing your temper means a lot of tears these days. If you don’t want me to ruin that makeup, then tell me what’s going on . ”

” Alright, princess,” Isabel laughs humorously, ” why You don’t take a look at your dress, so you can decide if you still want to twist our necks. ”

My jaw clenches and I clench my hands into fists, moving forward and violently unzipping the clothes bag. I don’t want to look at this dress. _ I want the dress I chose with the stylist. Unfortunately it doesn’t look like I’m going to get __the explanations I need any other manner , then I get into the game.

As soon as the zipper descends, I feel the air stolen from my lungs. __ Opening the waterproof cover, meeting meters and meters of bright white fabric . I have no idea what material it is, but it has the most notable luminescence __glow, making it look like a ray of pure moonlight. Pearls like the ones entwined in my hair were sewn into the bodice and skirts, accentuating the intricate swirling embroidery throughout the design.

Suddenly, I understand why everyone is behaving so strangely—even before my sister finally have mercy on me. “Ella, tonight isn’t just a ball. ” Cora tells me, her eyes sparkling. “It’s your mating ceremony. “

Chapter 250 – Mating Ceremony

Ella

If I thought the dress my dishonest friends designed on my back was dazzling on the hanger, it's nothing compared to the way it looks on me. I've never seen anything like it. The pearly fabric hugs my curves, the cleavage plunging between my breasts and thin straps leaving my back and flanks almost completely bare. The skirt ripples in a cascade of shiny chiffon, with a modest tail flowing behind of me as I walk.

Of course, my threat to spoil my makeup with tears is soon fulfilled when my eyes they fill with tears and I reach out to Cora and Elizabeth, babbling thanks and declarations of love for both . Then calm me down for a few minutes, before my sister puts her down .

“Enough.” Cora says after my third outpouring of thanks, ” no let’s waste all this beauty on us. Your companion is waiting. ”

My heart is pounding as we leave the suite, and I stroke item belly amazed. Your daddy did it again, I tell my puppy. Be sure to pay close attention to his romantic instincts as he grows up and simply ignore it Mom’s . You definitely want to follow your example when it’s time to choose a mate. Even as I think about the words, I realize how deeply I believe in them. I couldn’t ask for a better example for my son, and I almost start crying again just thinking about the kind of man we’re going to raise together.

I don’t even care about walking into the unknown anymore, not when I know Sinclair is pulling the strings behind it all . I lift my skirts as we leave my room, smiling insanely at the white heels lace peeking beneath my belly. _I expected Cora and Isabel to take me to the ballroom, instead I I found myself following them towards the palace gardens, my breath gasping for breath as we approached . When the balcony doors open, I have a moment of startled panic when I fear that my kneescan really give up – and the last thing I want to do is fall off ass before even taking a step down the hall.

Still , if anyone is to blame for my vertigo, it’s surely the palace elves who are working their magic to create the scene before we . It must have taken days, but I managed to lose everything. _ _ _ _ _ the neatly landscaped flower beds and familial topiaries carved were concealed by a vision directly from a fairy tale. An enchanted forest spreads out where once there was only a labyrinth of hedges, shrouded in fairy lights and wildflowers. Lanterns cast bright amber light upon the petal—path scattered at my feet, which descends into an arch of tall trees. And in the center , of the

All the Alpha delegations , the Vanaran courtiers and dozens and dozens of refugees became lined up in the spaces between the trees. _ _ I feel your manifestation of support and affection as a tangible hug, and I I can only laugh and smile with incandescent happiness. The nursery puppies are all dressed in formal dresses and small tuxedos, and Isabel leads them down the hallway as they scatter more flower

petals whenever they can.

Ethereal music floats in the air, though I can't decipher its origin . As the music changes, my sister turns to me. " Are you ready? She asks, cackling and wiping away a tear that escaped my cheek. "Are you handing me over? " I sob, wondering how I can stay serene enough to through my vows .

"Of course not. " Cora laughs. "That's a human tradition. Wolves believe that nothing can break family ties, and finding your mate certainly can't it means giving up on your family. I'm just here to show you the way. "

"What if I want you to walk with me? " I ask, feeling – I am strangely vulnerable. It's not like Sinclair hasn't already claimed me, or that this is changing anything . However, at the same time, I can't help but feel the magnitude of this ceremony . Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we've been through so much time of our relationship stuck to secrets, and now everything is open . ___ Maybe it's because dedicating ourselves to each other in particular feels so intimate and meaningful, but to do so before the whole world confers a inevitable gravity to the case . Maybe it's simply the visceral magic in the air, like an electric current pulsing around us and within us – in a way that makes me wonder if the Goddess can be looked at for us right now. _

"Well, only a monster would refuse such a request. Cora smiles, moving – moving to my side and wrapping her arm around mine. " I've got you, little sister." _

My vision blurs and I look at my sister with trembling lips , "I Love You".

Cora lowers her forehead, resting it against mine and swallowing mein his chocolate gaze. "I love you too. "A wave of Alpha power hits us as we take this moment, and I understand that my companion is feeling impatient..

"We'd better go. "Cora laughs," before he comes here and decides accompany him personally. As we begin our descent , Sinclair's expression goes from devotion to voracious and possessive, then comes back again at least three times. I can't take my eyes off him, and I can feel his passion for me so intensely how much I feel my own desire.

I am amazed to feel so much joy as the war progresses, when we still have so many challenges ahead and we will part ways in a matter of days. ___ And yet I am. I feel like we've stolen a moment in time – like this night and the celebration of our love would go on forever – even if only in our hearts. And I suppose so, because no matter what happens in the future, always We'll have that moment together. ___ we will always be _able to look back and remember, from Find constrength and consolation in our scandalous joy. It's an amazing gift, and I want nothing more than to savor every second.

I think Sinclair can feel the direction of my thoughts, both that his patience finally ran out. He walks to greet us at the end of the tree-lined path, pure love radiating from his pretty face. _

“You built a forest for me. I say foolishly, smiling at him. He knows how much I missed the landscape of our homelands, how desperately my animal interior fought in Vanara.

” I would build a thousand if I could, little wolf” He tells me reverently , caressing my cheek. _ _

I shook my head, fighting back tears. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you. ” _

“Well, it helps that you’re the sweetest creature that has ever walked the earth. ” Sinclair jokes. “It is only right that you be rewarded with my perfection. ”

I can’t help but laugh, knowing how critically my companion sees himself. “At least you’re finally starting to recognize how wonderful you are. I joke in response, leaning in to kiss him.

“Oh – ah,” he scolds, “not yet , problem. We have to do the ceremony first. ” _

“Are you really going to make me wait? “I pout, looking as miserable as possible.

He chuckles warmly, giving me a final squeeze before situating us to finish the procession . ” Trust me, mate , it’ll be worth it. Sinclair’s arm snakes around me in a protective cage as we continue over the tender grass . Cora is gone ahead, and is now standing next to Isabel in the altar .

When we finally reach the end of the hallway, we say our vows under the full moon and the stars, reaffirming our commitment to love and value each other for the rest of our days . – Part of me wants to complain that Sinclair had time to write _and essay_your speech, but when I open my mouth the words come on their own own .

“Dominic, until you found me , I didn’t even know I was lost . I start, looking into his bright green eyes. _ _ ” I thought I knew who I was and what I wanted out of life... I thought I was at the end _ _ _of a Chapter , until you me showed that it was only the beginning. I pause to try and steady my trembling voice. “When I was young, I dreamed of a life free of fear. But now I see that such an existence must also be _free of meaning_ – Because there can only be fear if we have nothing to lose. _ _ Now, there are a lot of things I haven’t worried about since I met you . I don’t mind losing my way, because I know you’ll always find me— even in my dreams... I don’t mind being hurt, because I know you’ll protect me as you can , and share my pain when it can’t be avoided. I don’t even mind facing the unknown, because no matter where life takes me , I I know as long as you’re

there, that's where I'm supposed to be. _ _ _ _ " 1

"But I'm also terrified, because of how much you've given me. How much you and this puppy have added to my life. I never knew it was possible to be so happy by being afraid, but I am . "I sob. _ _ _ _ I'm so thrilled to have so much to lose, and I promise never to take a single moment with you for granted. I may be scared, but I know deep in my soul that it doesn't matter what challenges may separate us, we will always find _ _ _ _our way back one towards the other .

I take a deep breath once more, gathering strength to the finalization . "You may be my destiny, but you are also my choice. I swear to always do everything in my power to make your life so full and glorious as you made mine ; to always love and support him, share his burdens and ease them whenever you can.

I promise to be a true partner and friend in good times and bad , and in any titles I may win in the future, be _Luna, Queen , or even Empress – the only one who matters to me, is companion . "

"My Ella," Sinclair purrs in response, holding my cheek on his excessively large hand. " You're not the only one who's gotten lost, little wolf.And you're not the only one who's scared . Every day I wake up in fear of the Last few months have been a dream miraculous And, as much as I desperately pray to be wrong , I'd rather dream of you for a thousand years than to live without you. "Your wolf blinks behind your eyes, and I know he speaks the truth.

"But you're better than any dream, Ella. So much so that at Sometimes I find it hard to believe that you're real— not because you don't have flaws or not. have flaws, not because I have mistaken you for a fantasy – but because you makes the fantasies that lonce held for a mate sound shallow and empty in comparison . " Sinclair admits with a wry smile.

"When I was a boy, I imagined that love was one-dimensional , that it was only sunshine , rainbow – iris and destiny . _ thought I wanted _nothing more than passion and adventure, preferably with someone handsome and intelligent. " He reveals shyly.

"But life isn't one-dimensional, and now I know I don't just want to passion, I also want compassion. I don't just want adventure, I want an anchor to keep me anchored in the seas more stormy and remind me of what is truly important in life ... I don't just want intelligence, I want friendship and support. And as far as beauty is concerned , I much prefer good humor and a brave spirit . Sinclair continues, his voice hoarse.

"You are all that, and more—my greatest weakness and my greatest strength. I am a much better man with you, than without you , and you make the worst moments of my life a blessing – because at least if I am fighting, I'm fighting with you. So, I swear to

honor you and protect you forever. I promise to keep growing and learning, to always be by your side and for our puppies . I swear I'll _always find you) , no matter how much distance is between us , or what trials we face. "I swear each kiss will be filled with more love than the last," and that our days together will only grow in love and devotion. "

We're kissing before anyone can declare our full vows, and when Sinclair finally sinks his fangs into my neck, a deafening joy ascends to the heavens. The stars themselves begin to fall, triggering a wave of oohs and ahs from the crowd as they they look up at the sky.

I can't drag myself away from my mate to look, but everyone seem to come to the same conclusion as Sinclair and I remain locked in the shelter of arms from each other – the Goddess is looking at us, after all.

Chapter 251 – To War

Ella

“Do we have to stay too long? I ask Sinclair, snuggling up to him. ” We’ve just finished the wedding party and the party is moving to the ballroom. The orchestra warms up in the distance, and the guests slowly shrink to outside the great hall, attracted by the promise of dancing.

” I think we have to stay until the opening dance, at least . He retorts, kissing my forehead as his fingers trace circles on my thigh. “I may have hijacked this event, but it’s still part of the summit. Why? ” He asks, sliding his wolf eyes to my flushed face, ” Is there anything you’d rather be doing, little wolf? “.

I shoot him a grumpy look , “you know exactly what I do.” I want to do it, Dominic. ”

Sinclair adopts a look of confusion, which my wolf doesn’t believe not for a second. ” I’m sure not. “He lies—the rat! “Do you want to go for a run? ” __

The offer is surprisingly tempting. It’s been almost a week since I last let go of my she-wolf, and she carries the weight of my belly with far more grace than I do. I would give a lot for the freedom to run and play as easily as __her_ yes , and I have a feeling that the nostalgia will only increase with the course of the pregnancy . Still , I don’t let my companion distract me: “No. I have a very different activity in mind.”

“Well, you know all you have to do is ask, honey . ” Sinclair states in a gravel voice, which betrays his own desire. “Tell me what you need and I’ll give it to you. ”

I fight a groan. He knows I can’t ask for these things in public, it’s hard enough to talk those words in the privacy of our bedroom. “My cunning wolf wants to do it anyway , use his own dirty trick against him, _speaking our desires_ and leaving his own animal Inside so angry that he will be forced to drag us along like a caveman . Unfortunately, my timid sensibilities and preoccupation with political optics prevail over it, so I can only nibble on my cake and pout while Sinclair murmurs promises in my ear.

” Soon, problems. ” He calms down, his hot breath vibrating over my skin, ” I’m so Eager to take her to bed as much as you, we just have to be patient . ”

Reluctantly, I allow Sinclair to lead me to the ballroom, where we receive the honor of the first dance — both as hosts of the gathering and as a newlywed couple ‘ . Sinclair spins me across the dance floor in his arms, and I avoid becoming Izzy looking into her beautiful eyes. _

I thought I’d want to give up after a dance, but once we’re in the moving, I remember how fun it is to spin this way, feeling lighter than the air . Only when my feet start

screaming in protest does my companion immobilize me with one of his burning looks that tell me he can see through me, "As they are those feet, problem?"

"It depends, if I say they're hurting, you'll tell me. Carry to our room and rub them for me? I ask, tapping my eyelashes.

"We're almost there, baby." He promises, taking me to the opulent seats in the front of the room. – Just one more toast and then we can get away. _ "

He guides me to one of the chairs and grabs a glass of champagne. Someone slams a knife into his own glass, and a gradual silence falls over the room. "First of all, I have to thank everyone who helped plan tonight. OneA huge amount of work was required to gather this summit and this ball, even before I decided to make everyone's job much harder by adding a mating ceremony to the mixture .

My lovely fiancée Ella was up day and night making sure everything was perfect, as well as hundreds of planners, coordinators, florists , chefs and Palace staff. "He keeps raising the glass ," for my brother, my sister-in-law, and our friend Elizabeth, you were instrumental in transforming the night and ___ __helping -me to surprise my companion, and I am extremely grateful to all of you . " He continues to descend less, seeming to fear leaving out a single person from your thank you list .

Only after finishing the compliments does he turn his attention to the Summit delegations . "As some of you may know, we were extremely excited to reach an agreement of summit last night. I am thrilled to announce that we will be forging an alliance with the bands of Vanaran in the war against Emperor Damon, and we are moving very quickly in view of the urgent situation . I cannot express the size of my respect and appreciation for all the delegations present here , as well as for its people across the continent – its support and Loyalty is a gift we will never be able to repay, and I am proud from be with all of you. "

Bursts of excited murmurs throughout the room, as many of the courtiers and refugees are learning this information for the first time . I look around at the crowd, watching as new hope and anticipation fills their faces assorted . Sinclair is still talking, describing the challenges ahead and the importance of this fight for shifters and humans. I have to admit that he is very talented when it comes to inspirational speeches , and this is clear from the energy growing in the room. Still, it's not until he mentions an impending deployment that I finally drag my attention from the public. _ _

"At this hour, next week, our forces will be gathered on the Royal Continent, ready to launch our offensive against the tyrant , together .com the resistance forces already on the ground. It is my greatest hope that we can put an end to this devastating conflict as soon as possible As soon as possible, but I'm also hesitant to make promises about battle timelines. War is unpredictable and chaotic at best , and I prefer to set realistic

expectations than making promises I can't keep. However, you have my word that I will do everything in my power to bring this war to a swift and speedy end. "

The room begins to spin when Sinclair finishes. "Maybe I'm a fool, but somehow I didn't expect him to leave Vanara so soon. I suppose I was so wrapped up in my plans to find my mother, that I couldn't calculate how a _a successful alliance_ would affect my companion's movements . Therefore, it is an unwelcome shock to know that he is planning to return home to fight next week – though I seem to be the only one. _ _ _

After Sinclair finishes, Gabriel stands, starting a chain of freebies that seem to drag on for too long. By the time my mate finally gets back to my side, I'm struggling to stay calm . " Did I mention how awesome you look tonight? My companion smiles, approaching my chair with outstretched hands.

I let him lift me up, but I can't formulate an answer. _ _ _

"Are you okay? Sinclair asks gently, his big hand circling the back of my neck.

"Can we go up now? " I ask weakly. Sinclair is already moving, lifting me into his arms and leading me to the sound of a symphony of raucous applause. No one seems to notice that none of us seem as thrilled as we just got along. _ _ _ _ _ _ _

"Talk to me, little wolf. Sinclair murmurs as soon as we're out of reach of the ballroom . _ _ _ _ _

"It's nothing. I gasp, quickly correcting myself when Sinclair growls in warning. "I mean , it's , but it's my fault. I don't... I don't... I didn't expect you to be back so soon. " _ _ _ _

_

Sinclair's eyes close, remorse washing away his features. "I'm sorry, Ella. I should have talked to you about it directly. We just finalized the plans this afternoon. The visit to the continent was an unwelcome reminder of the promises I made. I did it to myself when we left. I cannot – in good conscience – stay away now that we have the military support that we needed to. Besides, with you leaving to find your mother , there's no reason for me to stay here for longer . "

_

"So what happens when I find her and I'm ready to join?"to you Again, when is the time to have the baby? I ask, feeling terribly uncertain.

Sinclair sighs, carrying me to our suite. "Can I place an order, dear? " _

“Sure.” I agree, looking at your pretty face. __

“I know you’re feeling anxious right now, and we can talk about it if you need to. But we start tonight on such an amazing note, and I don’t want to knock ourselves down with conversations about war.” He pulls his hair away from my face. “I just want to celebrate to steal a few more hours without worrying about you and just stick together.” __

—

I nod anxiously, tears streaming from my eyelashes as I lean in her warmth, circling my arms around her neck. “I’d like that... Although I don’t know it, it may take some effort to make me forget.”

” Challenge accepted. Sinclair responds like a wolf, lowering his mouth to my neck. He pulls at the strap of my dress to reveal the swollen bite he inflicted on the altar. I whistle at the burning of the cold air, and Sinclair purrs in solidarity. “Poor Dear Fellow, is your mark sore?”

I nod pitifully, “You never claimed me without giving me an orgasm first.” I’m sorry. “It hurt a lot more than I expected.”

“Well, then,” Sinclair replies, his eyes sparkling as he takes my hand seriously, “let’s see what I can do about it.”

Chapter 252 – Isabel Guesses a Secret

3rd Person

Elizabeth spent most of Ella and Sinclair's mating ceremony distracted. The problem wasn't that she didn't feel very happy for her new friends, it was simply that his own mind was focused elsewhere . And while that focus wasn't too far off – it was complete. In fact, all of Elizabeth's attention was focused on James, who sat in the back of Vanaran's delegations with Sadie jumping into his lap.

The pilot's dark hair was combed back and his strong jaw was tightly shaven for the first time . He filled her velvet-lined tuxedo so completely that Elizabeth worried about the seams .it exploded, and it didn't help that she could smell him as clearly as if he didwas at its side, like oak moss , amber and sea salt... And another thing that was just James.

As the passionate couple exchanged their vows, Elizabeth's gaze drifted between James and her adopted daughter, overflowing with unspoken emotions. She was gripped by the most tortuous desire to go and be with them, and their wolf whimpered like a puppy in ___her mind.

It's not fair! The frustrated canine lashed out, unable to contain her fury as Sinclair nailed her fangs at the curve of Ella's throat , eliciting a wailing scream from Luna – one that made the huge Alpha growl with sympathy and desire in ___equal measure. Jealousy surged through Elizabeth's veins as she watched the honorable couple fight their instincts towards unite there and now, using drunken expressions and emitting wild energy as they fought by control .

I want Jame's brand. His wolf demanded for the hundredth time, annoyed at renewed complaint at the intimate ceremony. "Why don't you let me have you!"

–

It's too early. Elizabeth insisted, trying to let the canine feel the logic of her decision, instead of the agonizing desire that assaulted his senses. At the same time, another smaller one somewhere far away. __ Why ? How long will it take? How long do you have to stay voice murmured unhappily?

" Are you okay?" Cora whispered, misinterpreting the other woman's expression of pain as she leaned in to whisper into her ear . "Is this bringing back difficult memories? "

Immediately Elizabeth understood that the concerned human expected her to focus on the past, on its her own mating ceremony and bond with her late husband. The she-wolf managed to shake her head and draw her attention back to Ella and Sinclair , But the exchange was nothing short of shocking. His companion had left a little over a year ago, and the death of His daughter was an even more recent scam. Surely she should be

thinking about her true family now... the one she lost, not the one she was building.

Her confusion, guilt, and jealousy threatened to drag her down, then Elizabeth gave herself a silent jolt and pushed away the unwanted thoughts. It was all she could do to not let her gaze return to James and Sadie until the ceremony ended and the crowds began to flock to the party. Now James approached with a wide grin, the precious wrapping in your strong arms reaching Elizabeth the moment she arrived.

"You're amazing: James' words warmed Isabel from the inside out, which, combined with the sudden rush of endorphins as he hugged his little girl, forced a reluctant smile on the wolf's face.

"You don't have to say that." She blushed, shyly lowering her gaze to the floor.

"Oh, yes. James replied fiercely, pulling her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I don't believe in lies or hiding the truth – especially not when it's in the face from all. So if I say you look amazing, it's because you look so good that it would be a crime not to tell you. _ _"

Elizabeth nodded tremblingly, still keeping her gaze averted and grateful for being able to use Sadie as an excuse for her cowardice. "My dear scapegoat. She thought, tickling the baby's belly and earning a wide smile in response.

Our puppy is not a scapegoat. Her she-wolf objected vehemently, wagging her fluffy tail with utter adoration as she studied the sweet child. She's an angel. The canine made a special effort to make sure Sadie could feel the waves of love through their bonding and stress or instability from their mother. You're right, what I was thinking.

Elizabeth said, speaking directly to the baby. My angel dumpling. They laughed together as James watched, content to observe his favorite girls—at least less_time being at least. The soldier was not blind and it was clear that something was going on with his little wolf, but he knew it was best not to scare Elizabeth now. Instead, he leaned in to kiss her temple, savoring the feel of her soft body melting against her. "Are you ready for the party?"

Elizabeth frowned, but was strengthened by his firm presence at her side, "As I always will be."

A few hours later, Elizabeth's head was light from so much champagne and her heart was heavy for to watch Ella and Sinclair celebrate their happiness so loudly. They deserved this party more than anyone, but Elizabeth hadn't been the best company in this kind of event. It's been a while. She hated small talk and personal questions, largely because of all the answers she could provide usually made people sad and uncomfortable.

However, the longer the night dragged on , the more comfortable Elizabeth became , although She didn't realize it until she caught herself laughing out loud at a joke. She put her hand over her mouth in surprise, and a low purr sounded in her ear . "None of that, now. I love hearing you laugh. Her big blue eyes turned to James in surprise, wrinkling when she saw his expression indulgent .

Immediately Elizabeth realized that James was shielding her from the curious questions and tedious interactions all night long, And he had done it with such skill that no one noticed. – Whenever someone came too close to a subject <B29> , the she-wolf tensed and her protective partner steered the conversation in another direction without a second thought . _ _

Pure safely enveloped Elizabeth's senses, and she heard that strange, distant voice again. How long will it be enough? "How long do you have to be unhappy?"

Standing on tiptoe , Elizabeth smashed her lips into James's. He grabbed her by the waist, holding her slender form tightly against her chest as her free hand moved to Sadie. They held it together, becoming at the same time lost in each other, but reasoned for the little life in his care. _

"Mmm, do you mind telling me what you're thinking , little wolf? James asked, his chest vibrating in a deep rumble as his fangs brushed against his earlobe hers.

" I need to—I need to be alone with you. Elizabeth gasped, feeling terribly vulnerable and struggling to courage .

The soldier considered her for a long moment, noticing the way the she-wolf stood contortion eagerly against him, both with repressed emotion and with physical need. "Alright. He agreed, leading her out of the hall. "The nursery? "

Isabel looked at Sadie, remembering the first time she had to leave Sophie with a nanny, and wondering if it would be more or less painful now. "To leave Sophie. Elizabeth swallowed dryly, hiding her face in the shadows.of the corridor . "Then let's go to your rooms. " _

Jame slowed down until he stopped in the middle of the hallway. " Elizabeth? "

She turned, with an expression of wild uncertainty on her features. "Please? " She asked, her voice hoarse. "I've been denying my wolf for so long and you've been so wonderful. I don't know why I keep pushing you away... " Elizabeth said.He left with a helpless shrug. " I mean, I want to... We both want to... but I don't want to punish myself anymore. She confessed, her voice diminishing to little more than a squeal as tears filled his eyes . "I think it's like Ella says, to go on in a frenzy You don't mean forgetting the past, it just means freeing yourself from becoming his prisoner . "

James nodded, pursing his lips and nodding. "She's a smart wolf. He stepped closer, reaching out to cradle Sadie's downy head in his huge palm, before grabbing the back of Elizabeth's neck with the other. "But I'm afraid I don't understand. "There was a devilish glint in his lethal eyes, one that said to Elizabeth that he was playing with her now—a predator who just couldn't resist playing with your dinner. "What exactly are you asking me, Elizabeth? "

" I've been here all night, seething with jealousy of Ella and Dominic because they are so happy and in love. Elizabeth admitted, embarrassed. "After all their kindness to me, I still get so angry that they they can enjoy what I've lost." James cackled tenderly, moving closer. "And then I feel horrible and guilty and it's just a cycle vicious... then tonight I realized that the only person demanding that I be miserable... it's me... " She shared, tears streaming down her cheeks in perfect lines .

"No one else is telling me That I have to suffer, that I deserve to be alone. People have told me this before, but I don't think I was ready to hear it before, I think I needed to stay ___ to this place for own account . "I don't want to be unhappy anymore, James. Elizabeth murmured, sniffing as the great wolf did his best to just listen , rather than trying to offer comfort or fix it.

"I don't want to be alone... and I couldn't admit it until you showed up. You've made it very hard to keep lying to myself._" She he blinked, nervously biting the inside of his cheek. "I'm in love with you, for more reasons than I can. count . She concluded with a small shrug , tangling her fingers in the fabric of his shirt to steady himself. "I want you to claim me, James. "

Chapter 253 – Isabel is Claimed

James

At first, James thought he misheard her. Then he thought he had misunderstood. But there was no doubt now—not the way Elizabeth was looking at him, with big eyes full of hope, anticipation and a little fear. Hearing the protected she-wolf profess her love made her heart race, until it was __slamming violently against his ribcage as he sped to a gallop .

Elizabeth’s skin was bright pink, and she couldn’t really look him in the eye . Her gaze kept flying up and down, almost as if she thought James could reject it. This it was adorable and annoying at the same time. Didn’t she realize how crazy he was about her?

At the same time, he didn’t want to force her beyond her limits. It was one thing to think she was ready, and another to actually take such a step important. James wrapped a large hand in Elizabeth’s hair, pulling her face up.” You thought I’d refuse, honey? He asked, caressing her sharp jaw with the tip of his thumb. “Surely you realize how hopelessly in love I am with you, Elizabeth. ” _

She shrugged, sniffing harder now. “I don’t know. ”

“Oh, my sweet companion. He breathed, snuggling her into his chest. “I lost my mind for loving you, and it means the world to me that you feel the same. I’ve just been trying to be patient. “ _ _ _ _ I don’t want you to be patient anymore. Elizabeth grumbled, all she-wolf as her eyes gleamed neon blue. James showed off his fangs and growled softly, until the animal ferocity disappeared from the Elizabeth’s countenance , ” I think I need to be pushed. “She added with a small pout. “My she-wolf has me begged to give in to you for weeks, and I have resisted her. I appreciate you trying to give me time, but I can’t do it alone. I... _ _ _ _ _ I need help to take this final step. Elizabeth admitted, her knees looking like absolute jelly. _

James captured her lips with his, knowing exactly what she meant. Loving Elizabeth had been an exercise in endurance, self-discipline and absolute masochism. “I appreciate it, baby. He purred, kissing her cheek. “And I’m so proud of you for acknowledging and asking for help, but no there’s a rush. ” He told her, mostly to see how she would react. “Just know how you feel and that you’re ready to take that step. We can start with _getting more intimate_ and see how you feel . ”

Elizabeth did not disappoint the soldier’s wolf, throwing him a fierce scowl and digging his little feet into the ground. “I don’t just mean I want you to eat me, James. Elizabeth corrected him in a sultry tone, peeking out at the underneath her eyelashes and watching as his words sank. ” I mean, I want you to actually claim me. She clarified, running her little pink tongue over the seam of her lips. His words were getting softer and

more suggestive by the second, and it was everything James could do to keep his wolf in check. "I need you You fill me with your big , hard cock, and eat until I'm ruined by any another wolf . I need you to sink your sharp fangs into me."

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"Enough! James' blood was well beyond boiling point now, and though he didn't Wanting nothing more than to take her to bed in that instant, he couldn't resist kissing her either-it again. He growled, dragging her mouth to his and Elizabeth immediately opened it to his tongue, his light body moving restless against his. They surrendered for a few long, panting minutes, before James finally gave himself regain control of your senses. "There's something I have to tell you, before we go any further. " He grumbled, looking angry at his own best judgment.

Elizabeth winced, fighting a shiver of dread. She was worried about it... about what would happen to her relationship with James once the war broke out.really started. She had also seen the way all the Alphas were muttering and talking today, making plans and whispering strategies . And now with James looking at her, his brow furrowed with regret... It wasn't hard to guess what he was about to say. "You go with Dominic into battle, don't you? " She stated, her mouth suddenly looking very hard .

"He asked me to be his second-in-command while sending Roger to some another mission . " _ James confirmed, trying to read Elizabeth's closed features. "The refugees won't need me to transport them every day, because we will be between them and the threat. " He sighed heavily. "It will be a relief. _ _ "

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes burning. " He'd be a fool if he was without you."

" Can you look at me, sweet fellow? James asked, using that sacred nickname for the first time, and seeing the shape as the vibrations of his voice whizzed through the she-wolf. _

She raised her bright eyes to him, and he kissed her again, at length . "I'm going to do everything in my power to get back home, to you and Sadie . Nothing will keep me away. His need for her was growing wild and violent, even stronger now that they talked about separation. Elizabeth simply nodded, arching into his mouth , searching for his lips with her hers.

James only favored her for a moment, by pushing back and grabbing her hips with an alarming force. "Tell me now, Elizabeth. James begged, desperate to claim it , but I hate to scare her. "Before we go too far to turn back. Are you sure that's what you want? "

Looking at him now, she'd never been so sure of anything. "If you plan to flee to war on the s*tch, then you don't has a choice. You're going to claim me, man."The words were

spoken in Elizabeth's voice. trademark ferocity, but also a shiver of fear , like if She still didn't trust this to be real.

James stripped Elizabeth naked as if she were a carefully wrapped gift, whose paper is too beautiful to risk tearing. He kissed every new inch of skin he bared, running his lips down his arms, neck and shoulders her as the blouse disappeared, then working his way down his flat belly until he reached the button of his jeans. (2

It was torture, the way he danced in the places where she more needed his mouth. He took off her bra, licking and nibbling on her spine until her wrist was racing , then doing the same thing with her panties, rolling them out of her hips.and devoting his attention to the curve of his hip, to the bulge of her ass and the inside of her thighs.

Chapter 254 – Cora Gets an Unwelcome Surprise

third person

" Well, it looks like you and I are the only bachelors left in this place , " Cora commented to Gabriel , watching Isabel and James in their far corner of the table . Thankfully, they weren't as obvious about their romance of her as her sister was of her and Sinclair .to whom one could easily be shocked if the couple did not realize that they had an audience .

Isabel and James , on the other hand , had been snuggled together for the better part of an hour , close but not really touching . really his _Proximity isn't what gave them away it was their laser focus on each other , not speaking or looking at anyone else . _ It was as if they were the only two people in the world . _

Cora felt a pang of jealousy and immediately forced her away , embarrassed by the ugly emotion . Instead , she tried to concentrate on her conversation with the king . " Excuse me , but I happen to be dating a very handsome wolf named Thomas . ". Gabriel replied , not sounding annoyed in the least by her assumption of him.

Audible Gift Memberships

" Oh . " Cora frowned , obviously disappointed to learn that even the Vanaran king was also part of a couple now . " I'm sorry , I should n't have assumed , " she sincerely apologized , even as questions welled up in the back of her head mind . Namely When had he become so sentimental that the sight of just one happy couple could make his heart overflow with longing ? What learning about another could make her boil with envy ?

" Okay . " _ Gabriel assured him : " It is intentional . I prefer people to keep guessing about my love life . "

Cora concentrated enough to sneer sympathetically , " Yeah , I 'd imagine there are a hundred too many opinions on that particular subject . " _

" You can say that again . " Gabriel chuckled , taking a sip of his wine from him . Then , a mischievous expression appeared on his face in the form of a small , secret smile as if he was about to admit something he should n't . goes_ good though _ Someday soon I hope to make it official . _ _ "

Cora forced herself to smile . Congratulations ! _ " To make a relationship official in the world of shapeshifters meant a formal claim : another mating ceremony . She tried to hide the sudden , inexplicable pain that swallowed her insides from her , silently wondering if she was freaking out ... or maybe about to get her period . She was never so moody and she could n't understand it . _ _

“ Thank you , but if it happens it will be after the war . Gabriel replied , visibly recanting her own hopes of him in favor of realistic expectations .

” Are you sure ? Cora asked , nodding at James and Isabel . __ ” Maybe they have the right idea , bond while you can . ”

It was their last night in Vanara , either traveling to the halls of Altaran to find Ella’s mother , or returning to the mainland with Sinclair to face Damon . Either way , they would all be separated by this time tomorrow ... and goodbyes in times of war . They were the worst of all . _ Cora she knew that there were never guarantees in life , and she knew especially the cost of fighting at home . Suddenly, an image flashed in his mind of her, a bloody vision of the operating room that afternoon , of a resistance fighter they had failed to save . Only in his mind ‘s eye of him was Roger ‘s face in that lifeless form , instead of the stranger he had been unable to save .

“ Cora , are you okay ? Gabriel asked suddenly , worry seizing him as tears welled up on the human ‘s lashes .

“ I’m fine . She assured him through a completely unconvincing smile . _ “ I just need a moment . Some fresh air . ” _ She gasped , pushing her chair back . He met Ella’s concerned gaze and shook his head to make sure she was right. her sister did not follow her . Unfortunately , there was nothing she could do to stop Roger from following her .

Cora moved stiffly for the balcony doors and ran out onto the terrace . The gardens were still decorated from the night before , though they were much quieter now . Courtiers and delegations , all refugees willing and able to fight , __ everyone was home preparing for war . _ Those who weren’t were back in the dining room trying to enjoy what little time they had left together . Cora descended into the maze of plants , sucking in great gulps of air as her awareness of her cruelly narrated. the scene . __ And tonight they ‘ll all go up to their rooms and hold each other tight and make sweet , sweet love and I ‘ll be here ... staring at a fucking leaf .

Cora made a face and shook herself a bit , “ Enough ! ” , she scolded herself . “ You’re being a brat . It’s not their fault they’re happy . ”

“ Talking to yourself , little human ? A familiar and infuriatingly deep voice sounded behind her . __

Cora jumped , turning back to look at Roger . ” You know where I come from , it’s rude to stalk lonely women in the dark and listen to their private conversations . ”

Roger frowned , as if racking his brains . “ No , no , we come from the same place and I don’t remember any rules like that . Also , is it a conversation if you are having it with

yourself ? ” _

“ It’s the most private type of conversation . I answer haughtily , turning my nose towards the handsome wolf . _ _ _ ” So do us both a favor and run before you make things even more awkward than they already are . ”

Roger pursed his lips , shoving his hands into his pockets as he crept forward . ” Well, since things are already so awkward , I might as well ask why you’re crying ... and why you were mad because someone is happy . ” Cora crossed from _ arms . on his chest From him, wishing he could kill this man with his eyes alone ... then trying and snorting when the big wolf just chuckled . ” Come on , ” He encouraged , moving so close now that they were almost touching . _ _ _ ” Do you know that I can be a _ very good listener . ”

Somehow , Cora doubted that Roger’s services as an impartial friend and advisor extended to her feelings for him ... not that she had feelings, of course . ” Actually I ’m going to bed . She lied quickly . But listen , in case we do n’t have one opportunity in the Tomorrow I want to thank you for being so supportive of me . _ _ _ Tor helping me and getting me out of Moon Valley in the first place . _ _ _ You saved my life . She held out her hand , ” I hope we meet again . ” ”

Cora was counting the minutes until her and Ella ’s departure , and dreading them . She knew that saying this goodbye would be difficult , but she was also the one she wanted the most to get out of the way .

” Oh, I see . ” Roger’s lips unfurled in an utterly devilish smile . “ I was wondering why you didn’t mention it . Dominic didn’t tell you . ”

” You didn’t tell me what ? Cora snapped , not liking the predatory grin on her face one bit .

“ Well , since the killer told Damon that the Alpha is dead , his next logical targets are Ella and the baby . _ This possibility seemed to be confirmed when Kieran was approached by Damon , so we made arrangements to ensure additional security on his journey . “. Roger explained vaguely , looking like the cat that ate the canary . _ “ You must realize that my brother puts the safety of his mate and his son even above his own ... he will spare no resource or expense for Ella and Rafe . ”

” What are you saying ? Ella Cora demanded , though she had a terrible feeling that she already knew .

” I’m saying you do n’t have to worry about getting separated or something happening to me while you’re on Altara .” Roger clarified , still smiling as he pushed Cora against the wall .

" Why not ? _ Cora swallowed , cursing her body as she instinctively backed away from the wolf .

Roger bared his fangs . " Because I'm going with you . " He stated , in a tone that sent shivers down Cora 's spine . _ " I'll be with you every step of the way . " Roger continued as Cora 's shoulder blades collided with the stone , and he loomed over her , taking her cheek in his great hand . " Day and night , for the next few weeks ... on a chain of deserted islands ... with nothing to do but watch over your sister with a dozen other guards . "" . she purred Ella, and Cora found her lashes droop , wondering if he was about to kiss her ... and then wondering if she would have the strength to stop him .

He did n't . " I don't know about you , " Roger concluded , his dark eyes boring into Cora's as she looked up at him again , nervously licking her lips . His glowing wolf gaze dropped from her to follow her little pink tongue from her, and suddenly the Beta was finding his pants too tight . _ " But I'm going to work hard to think of ways to entertain ourselves during those long hours on the boat and in the temple . " _ _ _

Cora's heart pounded frantically against her ribs , her thighs clenching reflexively to ease the ache in her core . " Surely a temple dedicated to the Goddess is a very holy and sacred place , " Ella Cora suggested , her voice quavering . " Probablywe will have tobe very quiet and respectful while we are there . "

Roger laughed , a sort of ominous , knowing roar . " Sweet Cora , is that really what you expect , knowing what you make of our kind ? " "

Suddenly, her mind returned to the changing holidays and traditions she was familiar with , and the few she was able to celebrate with Ella this year . She thought of the Solstice , with its bonfires , moon baths , and wild hunt . She thought of the primitive , paganthe energy of those nights , the way they are all rooted in ancient magic and base instincts , the raw sensuality they all seemed to bring to the surface . She thought of the heady power of being alone with Roger in these completely nondescript settings , and tried to imagine yourself in a place of mystery and power , where all your senses would be heightened even more .

And suddenly she understood why Roger seemed so pleased with himself .

It was clear that he did not expect her to be able to resist once they left together . He planned to make her his , sooner rather than later . And the scariest part of all ? Cora had a very bad feeling that she was going to have success .

Chapter 255 – To War

Ella

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!” Cora grouses, shooting me a death glare as we gather at the Royal docks. Vanarium–hulled ships fitted with cutting edge defense and weaponry systems are moored along the wharf, their crews flitting around like hundreds of tiny ants as they prepare the vessels for departure. One, the smallest, is bound for the Altaran Islands and my mother; the others are all headed back home to face Damon.

None of us want to say goodbye. Sinclair bundles me in his arms and nuzzles my neck, his wolf grumbling and growling as he nibbles my mating mark, repeatedly reminding me that I’m his – as if I could forget. Mine, mine, mine. He proclaims, his wandering hands moving over my round belly. We don’t leave for another half hour, but I’m already beginning to worry he won’t let me go when the time comes.

Isabel is in the same boat, cuddled up with James and Sadie, trying to pretend she isn’t crying as the big Soldier soothes and pets her. She focuses her attention on her young daughter, rocking and shushing the perfectly content child – as if Sadie is the one in need of comfort instead of her mother. James doesn’t say a word, merely kissing Isabel and holding her a bit tighter.

Of course, when I say no one wants to say goodbye, I’m excluding my sister, who is still complaining about the fact I didn’t warn her Roger would be joining our journey as added security. “Seriously Ella, you had to know I wouldn’t approve!”

“I’m not listening!” I sing in reply, closing my eyes and kissing my mate. I slide my arms around his neck, and Sinclair chuckles as he claims my lips. That’s it. His wolf croons in my head. Just ignore her and let me gobble you up, little mate.

I can’t help but giggle into his wolfish grin, catching a flash of emerald fire in his eyes as he captures my nape and drags my mouth back to his. I lean into my mate, letting him support my weight as we get lost in one another. Heat pools in my belly, and I can feel my inner animal starting to get excited. Scenting my arousal, Sinclair pulls back with a reluctant frown – there’s not enough time for us to come together again before we go, and continuing to rile one another up before parting is a recipe for misery.

Thus I don’t really mind my sister’s whining, because at least it’s a welcome distraction from the imminent separation of our party. I’m painfully aware that this might be the last time I ever see my mate, but it isn’t only Sinclair I’m going to miss – nor is he the only one for whom I’m worried. When all this began I didn’t know any of these people, now I feel as though I have a deep and abiding bond with each of these wolves – forged through the crucible of mutual trauma. Of course it’s more than that too. They’re my family, my pack. 1

I don't want to lose any one of these people... but we're going to war and the unavoidable reality is that some of these shifters won't survive. The mere thought forces me to clamp my eyes shut. If I continue watching them, I'm sure I'll start to cry – though today I think tears are inevitable. Anger is easier, so I direct all my pent up feelings towards the person who truly deserves them: Damon. Standing here, looking around at the somber, solemn faces of the people I love most – it's painfully obvious how much we all have to lose, and I'd happily destroy anyone who tries to steal more from us than has already been taken. It honestly makes me want to forget finding my mother so I can go straight home and destroy that tyrant.

"You're glowing again, trouble." Sinclair tells me softly, leaning his cheek against my hair. I crack an eye open and take a peek at my skin. At first it seems like nothing more than a shimmer – like the iridescent sheen of snake scales in sunlight, or the glimmering luster of pearl dust. However the effect only grows stronger as I watch, and soon it appears as though my pores are emanating their own white light. I feel like I'm back on the Ether – as if my altered consciousness is bending reality to ensnare my senses.

"I'm fantasizing about how you're going to kill Damon." I confess, breathing in his wonderful scent as grisly images fill my mind. I share the pictures with Sinclair through our bond, hoping to inspire him. Decapitation, disembowelment, beating him bloody with his own dumb leg... or maybe you could tie him up and sick some rogues on him.

"Mmm, my bloodthirsty mate." He purrs, letting me feel the steady vibrations in his chest. There's a flash of sadistic appreciation through our bond, but Sinclair's wolf seems much more interested in exploring every inch of my glowing skin. "I can't wait to see all the incredible things you learn from your mother." He lifts my hand to his lips, holding my gaze as he bestows long, luxurious kisses over my knuckles. "You hold such mysteries for our kind, Ella. There's no telling the secrets you're about to uncover." He murmurs, rocking me back and forth in place. "I can't wait to see you figure it all out and unlock your power... to watch you come into your own. My Ella."

I can hear the words he's leaving unsaid, his hope that he lives long enough to see these gifts manifest, and to see our son come into the world. Oh Goddess, I think as his mood grows heavy. It's getting close to our departure time, but I'm not ready to say goodbye, not yet. I'll never be ready. I nod eagerly, "I'll learn. And I'll come to you as soon as I can. Maybe we can castrate Damon together?" I suggest hopefully.

Sinclair laughs, "Whatever happened to that innocent little nanny who wouldn't hurt a fly?"

I hiccup and sniffle, fighting the emotions seeking to drown me. There's a new frisson of tension in the air, a sense of communal understanding that we need to finish up. I try to smile, "She was corrupted by a big bad wolf, of course."

Sinclair kisses me, pouring all his tenderness and passion through our bond. "Listen to me, baby. We don't have a lot of time left."

I shake my head, the tears hovering on my lashes immediately tumbling down my cheeks. The last time I said goodbye to my mate he almost died, and that was supposed to be a safe trip. Now he's actually going into battle. Primal fear and bad memories rage and roil inside my chest, and part of me wants to cling to my mate and beg him not to go.

"I know, sweetheart." Sinclair assures me, not needing any explanation for my sudden panic. "It will be okay." He soothes, stroking my trembling lower lip with his thumb. "I know I can't promise us a future, but Goddess... if I could..." He shakes his head in frustration, holding me a bit tighter as his green gaze seers me. "When we get through this I'm going to write you a whole book of promises and spend the rest of our lives fulfilling them."

"The only promise I need is for you to always remember how much I love you." I counter, trying to steady my shaking voice. "How much Rafe loves you... and your pack." I want to bury my head in his chest and sob, but somehow I manage to keep going. "I need you to promise that whatever happens, you always keep reminding yourself how worthy you are of all that love – because you are. You're brilliant and selfless and deserve so much more credit than you take." I'm trying to think of all the things I need to say to him, just in case this is the end. I don't want to leave a single word unsaid. "And you musn't blame yourself for whatever comes to pass. You have given everything for this pack, and you're about to give even more. None of this is your fault, Dominic." "Right back at you, gorgeous." He smiles sadly, and a pulse of uncertainty escapes me. Now that the moment is upon us, the idea of running off to remote shifter lands without him is too daunting to contemplate. Self-doubt assails me, and Sinclair doesn't accept it for a moment. "I believe in you." He professes intently. "I know you will succeed, I know you will find the answers you seek, and I know that you will master your powers with flying colors. You have an incredible future ahead of you, no matter what happens in this war, you know that?" Sinclair's eyes are shining as he returns my sentiments, trying to fit a lifetime of love and emotion into a few words.

"I believe in you." I reply tearfully. "Damon is no match for you, Dominic. He's a little boy who got hold of a big stick and he thinks he can make us all back down. You're going to prove him wrong, you're going to show him what a weak little insect he is."

"I love you so much." Sinclair declares, dragging me into his arms. "If Damon wants to keep me from you, he's going to have to do a lot worse than kill me." He drops onto his knees then, pressing his palms to either side of my tummy and leaning his forehead against my navel. My precious pup. I have to leave you now, and I'm so sorry. It's the last thing I want in the whole world, but I promise I'm going to do everything in my power to come back to you. I can't wait to meet you, Rafe. I'm expecting to feel confusion or offense through my bond with the baby, but instead I hear the tiniest, garbled wail. It

almost sounds like a person speaking underwater, only much more garbled and high pitched. My eyes widen as I realize that our unborn pup is crying within my womb – for the first time. Sinclair looks at me in surprise and absolute misery as we reach the same conclusion: Rafe understands. And he is not happy.

Chapter 256 – Altara

Ella

The floor of the ship's afterdeck bucks and reels on the rolling ocean waves, the deck surging up and falling beneath my feet. I grip the railing and try to breathe in the fresh sea air, keeping my eyes locked on the distant horizon. Cora appears by my side with a bottle of water. "How's the nausea?"

"You would think a ship this large couldn't be thrown around so easily." I chuckle in reply, gingerly sipping the water. It's our fourth day at sea, and I barely made it through the second afternoon before the swells became so rough that I began to feel ill. After my first bout of vomiting I fled our stuffy cabin and came up above deck which helped – but now I'm afraid to take my eyes off of the horizon, and the Goddess knows there isn't any land in sight to spot instead.

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Cora laughs, "babe this tub is a drop in the bucket." She reminds me, patting the side of the silver watercraft. "Besides, they warned us these seas are rough."

I groan, taking another drink. "How much longer?"

Her face lights up, "I just came from the wheelhouse, the captain says we should be able to sight the islands within the hour!"

That gets my attention. I straighten up immediately, trying to shake off my malaise. Adrenaline rushes up to beat back some of the illness, and I find myself inspecting my clothing for wrinkles and stains. Maybe it's utter insanity, but if I'm going to be meeting my mother today I want to make a good impression, even if I am five months pregnant, sick to my stomach and fleeing a war zone.

"Easy now, it'll be a few hours yet." Roger chides, coming to stand on my left. He leans on the railing mirroring Cora, who determinedly ignores him. "We'll have plenty of time to make ourselves presentable after we've docked."

That does settle my wolf a bit, but I wish Sinclair was here. I pull out my phone and turn on the recording of his purrs, feeling some of my tense muscles unwind as soon as I press play. My nerves have been absolutely fried since we separated. On one hand this is to be expected – given the seriousness of our situation. However, something tells me that my anxiety is less about the wolf I left in Vanara, and more about the woman for whom I'm headed. After all, I know Sinclair loves me almost too much. I have no idea how my mother feels about me, and I've been

–

dreaming of her for as long as I can remember.

I peek at my sister. “So... do you hate me?” I ask, pulling her attention away from Roger.

Cora, who was thoroughly occupied staring daggers at the wolf, gradually drags her attention to my face. Her brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we spent our whole lives wishing for parents.” I sigh, searching my sister’s lovely face. “if the situation were reversed I think I’d feel pretty jealous.”

“I mean I am.” Cora shrugs, having the grace to look slightly abashed. She wraps her arm around me and rests her head on my shoulder. “But I’m happier than I am jealous – I want this to be everything you’ve been hoping and waiting for, Ellie.”

For one moment, I forget we aren’t alone. Roger and the sailors fade into the background, and then it’s only Cora and me, looking out at the deep blue water surrounding us on all sides. I snuggle into my sister’s warmth, needing to feel her affection as I contemplate the uncertainty awaiting us. I inhale a shaky breath, “What if she doesn’t like me?” I whisper, in an impossibly small voice.

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Roger has the decency to make himself scarce as Cora pulls back from me in surprise. “Ella, what are you talking about? This woman prayed and prayed for you for years! She wanted a child more than anything and then she didn’t even get to raise you, if anything I expect she’s going to like you too much.”

I’m not ashamed to say that I let this fantasy take hold of my mind for a minute. I picture myself arriving at an ethereal temple by the coast, and a beautiful woman in long robes running towards me with open arms. I imagine feeling her embrace... my mother’s embrace, and I shudder. “I’m afraid to hope.” I admit, gnawing on my lower lip. “It’s so much easier with the war because as horrible as things are, I’ve only been caught up in this for a few months I mean it hasn’t even been a year, Cora!”

“I know.” She nods in understanding, rubbing my back. “And you’ve been holding out hope for parents for the better part of 30 years.” A hard edge enters her usually soft voice. “It’s much easier to believe in the things you haven’t already seen played out a hundred times before.”

I blink the tears from my eyes to study Cora’s countenance, which remains drawn and sober. There’s something so lost in her deep brown eyes, and I realize she’s probably feeling about as raw as I am right now. I may be vulnerable and on-edge, but she sounds so disconsolate that I simply can’t bear it. “I’m really rich now, you know.” I tell

her with a sly smile. Cora blinks in confusion, “I’m sorry, do you want me to hate you?”

“No!” I laugh, rolling my eyes. “I’m saying that I could hire an investigator... if you want to find your family.”

Cora’s face lights up for a second, then quickly falls. “No.” She answers shortly, and I wonder if she’s talking to me or her own conscience. “I hate to say it, sis. But I think we’ve maxed out our miracles.” 1

“You never know, just look at what happened with me.” I encourage, knowing I’m walking a thin line now. I want to help my sister, but I also don’t want to be cruel by giving her false hopes.

“You also happen to be a she-wolf with the Goddess’s own blood in your veins.” Cora counters, a note of derision in her voice. “Somehow I doubt things will turn out so well for me.”

“I’m sorry, Cora.” I proclaim sincerely, “I wasn’t trying to rub your face in my good fortune.” (1

“It’s okay,” Cora exhales, her entire body softening as she wraps me in a hug. “I know you were only trying to help, but I came to terms with the fact that I will never know where I came from a long time ago. Being reminded... it only hurts.” She has to bend over my swollen belly in order to properly embrace me, and her voice is full of warmth when she finally pulls back. “But Ella, your mother is going to love you so much. Just think, all those years you were waiting for her and not knowing if she was even out there... well she was waiting for you too, probably counting down the days until she finally got to meet you, knowing you were out there but forced to stay away.”

My heart swells in my chest, and I cling to my sister, nuzzling her shoulder. “Maybe we can share her.” I suggest, “If she’s like me then she probably wanted lots of babies. I bet she’d adopt you.”

“Thank you.” Cora laughs, “But we should probably wait and see what she’s like before we decide to make any offers.

I scoff, “hey it’s a good deal. Two awesome daughters for the price of one.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, is she buying you now?” Cora teases. “With what money? She’s been living in a wolf convent for the last five years.”

“She was a queen.” I respond, my eyes narrowed. “She probably has it stored away somewhere.”

“Yeah, or she donated it like most people when they join a religious sect.” Cora responds with amusement.

“Fine, she won’t buy us!” I finally surrender, “it was just an idea.”

“A ridiculous idea.” Cora laughs, and I squeeze her even more tightly.

“I’m sorry to interrupt ladies,” Roger says, stepping close enough to drag our attention away from one another. “but if you want to go to the bow, land has been sighted. The navigator confirmed it’s the Altaran islands.”

Before the words are even out of his mouth, Cora is gripping my arm and pointing into the north, her face alight with excitement. “Ella, look!”

A group of islands appear so suddenly on the horizon that I have to wonder whether or not they might have been pulled up straight out of the sea for our benefit. They’re dark and jagged and entirely too ominous, with black volcanic beaches and jagged peaks thrusting skyward, lined with spiraling cliffs. My heart races the closer we come, and soon the islands are not merely blurry shadows, but solid, stark and in high contrast to the endless ocean.

And there, on the distant shore, stand three figures in long robes – waiting.

It seems to take a lifetime for our ship to moor, and another lifetime over by the time we’ve loaded into smaller boats to venture ashore. I recognize Reina as soon as I see her, standing tall and proud between the priests from my memories. If I expected her to greet me with tears or laughter, I was wrong.

Instead she merely looks at me with sharp, searching eyes. They travel up my body, assessing me coolly as they finally rise to my face. “You’re too late.”

Chapter 257 – Queen Reina

Ella

Of all the things I expected to hear when I met my long-lost mother for the first time, it certainly wasn't, "You're too late."

I stop dead in my tracks, glancing nervously at Cora, Roger and Philippe. We're barely out of the transport boats, and my bare feet are sinking into the dense black sand covering the beach. It slips between my toes, and I absentmindedly squidge them this way and that, enjoying the sensations while my brain tries to catch up.

"We're too late?" I finally repeat as our little party remains frozen at the edge of the waves, wondering if we might be sent back the way we came.

"You should have been here months ago." One of the priests announces grimly.

I recognize the man from my dreams, and suddenly my heart stops beating. His face is so familiar, and yet I doubt I'd be able to pick him out of a lineup. He's at once entirely unremarkable, yet impossible to forget. Cora leans into me, sensing my tension if not my malfunctioning heart. "I didn't even know this place existed until last week!" I say by way of explanation, my voice hoarse and wary. "I would have come sooner if I knew I was supposed to."

The three figures exchange dubious glances, and though my wolf refuses to take her attention off the priests, my other senses are completely distracted by my investigation of my mother. She smells familiar, but when I reach towards her with my thoughts, I come up against a blank wall. She's shutting me out. My heart sinks, and a new voice pulls my attention from Reina's beautiful face.

The second priest – also from my nightmares – grumbles, "Very well then, you'd better come in." We begin to move forward, but Reina stops us with a raised palm. "Just Ella." She orders, her voice soft and yet inarguable. "The rest of you will have to return to your ship."

"We're not leaving her." Cora objects, her hand wrapping tightly around my arm as if she fears they might attempt to take me by force.

"You'll have to." The first priest responds dryly. "This is sacred land. Only those blessed by the Goddess are permitted to enter, you risk grave misfortune by setting foot in her temple without invitation."

"Then we'll risk it." Roger bites back, stepping forward with utter authority. "We stay with Ella." Reina arches one blonde brow as she considers my mate's brother. After some contemplation, she concedes, "As you wish." One graceful palm is outstretched,

welcoming our small group onto the island. “But no more, the rest of your crew will have to stay aboard.”

The trio turn their backs and begin marching through the sand towards the temple. I stare at their retreating forms in shock, trying to wrap my head around this turn of events. They seem both entirely unsurprised and thoroughly underwhelmed by my arrival. Granted, I wasn’t expecting fanfare or even a welcome banner, but I did assume we’d be received with warmth... especially by my mother.

She barely looked at me.

I feel a tugging at my elbow and realize Cora is trying to pull me forward. Meanwhile I’m standing here gaping like a fish, too stunned to move. “Come on, honey.” Cora encourages softly, “let’s get you off your feet.”

Despite our chilly greeting, Queen Reina and the priests turn out to be generous hosts. They usher us into the temple and set us up in front of a blazing fire. A few novice priestesses carry in dishes piled high with food, as well as kettles full of tea and coffee.

I find myself shrinking next to Cora, increasingly ill-at-ease with every moment that passes. No one says a word. Reina and the priests seem perfectly content to wait until the servants have delivered everything and we’re alone... unfortunately for them, I’m not so patient. “Would someone please tell us what’s going on?”

“You don’t know?” Reina inquires, setting down the steaming teapot in her hands.

“Well I thought I did!” I burst, still gripping Cora’s hand. “I came here to find you and learn about my past and my powers, but now I’m only confused.” I explain, “You seem to be expecting us, yet you tell us we’re too late.” I look to Reina now, trying not to show my hurt. “You’re my mother, but you don’t seem to care that I’m here!”

“That isn’t true.” Reina corrects me gently. “We’re all very happy you’re here, Ella. We’re just worried. There’s not much time left.”

“That may be true, but it isn’t my fault.” I counter, crossing my arms over my chest, “You left me helpless, defenseless, with no possible tools or advantages in life. You didn’t leave me a single hint about my true identity, so is it any surprise that it took me so long to figure it out?”

“No.” The first priest concedes, bowing his head. “It isn’t.”

“Will you at least tell me your names?” I inquire, feeling far more bold than I did a few minutes ago, “I keep calling you one and two in my head and it’s confusing.”

"I'm Silas." The second priest offers me something akin to a smile, "and this is Pollux."

"You two," I accuse hoarsely, not sure where I'm headed with this, or why it's coming out now. "You bound my wolf, you tormented me."

"We also saved your life." Pollux points out, his dark eyes flashing.

"Did it ever occur to you that I might not have been broken enough to need saving if you'd protected me?" I demand harshly, trying and failing to get to my feet. Instead my ungainly belly topples me right back into my chair.

"Just stay down, babe." Cora murmurs in my ear. "You're more intimidating seated than standing at this point."

I glare at her over my shoulder, before extending a hand to Roger with a pleading expression. He helps me to my feet, and I begin to pace. "All this time I've been asking myself why I was being punished, why I was being tested." I turn my focus to Reina, "I've waited 30 years to find out where I came from, and now I finally find you and it's like.." I trail off, pulling out my phone so I can play the recording of Sinclair's purrs. If this is confusing for Reina and the Priests, they give no hint. Instead they wait until my breathing has gone from heaving gasps to steady exhales, and I summon my remaining patient. "I just want answers. I just want to know who I am and what I'm supposed to do in this war. Where in the world do I belong?"

I don't realize I'm crying until Cora scrambles up and wraps herself around me, making soft shushing sounds. "You belong with me, Ella. If nowhere else, you belong with me, and Dominic and Henry..."

"You belong right here among the Goddess's most honored servants." Reina interrupts, earning a vicious glare from Cora. "Surely you must realize you are no ordinary woman."

"But I am." I insist, clutching my sister. "Do you think you can erase so much hurt with a few divine gifts? Do you believe that beauty or wealth can undo the crimes committed against me?"

"You are not ordinary, Ella." Reina repeats firmly. "Perhaps you are in matters of the heart, but you certainly aren't when it comes to lineage and power."

"Well what good does that do anyone, if I'm too late?" I inquire, trying to get my raging emotions under control. "Are we bound to fail now?" Tears steam from my eyes as I contemplate this possibility for the first time. "Are... are you telling me I'm too late to help us win? To save the packs?"

The priests exchange unreadable glances. "Not necessarily. We didn't mean to make it

sound so final.” Pollux explains. “None of us know what the future holds, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried.”

“We’re sorry for what you have suffered, Ella.” Silas offers, sounding sincere despite his austere expression. “And we’re sorry that this meeting isn’t what you expected. It’s clear there have been a few misunderstandings, but the important part now is that you’re here. We just have to do our best and hope that it’s enough.”

I shake my head, feeling completely adrift and longing for my mate so fiercely I could scream. I reach for him through our bond, even though I know he’s much too far away to feel me. My tugs on the connection come up empty, but I notice that I can feel his absence. It’s like a hole in my chest that can’t be filled again until he returns. But it is there. Whereas, with Queen Reina, I don’t feel anything at all – not even an absence of what should be.

I turn to Reina, realization dawning. “We aren’t bonded.” I assess, wrapping my arms around myself. “Are we?”

“No.” Reina confirms gravely, and I see a flash of pain in her eyes. “Ella, you have to understand that I only carried you... I was never your true mother.”

“I don’t understand.” Tears burn my eyes, “If you’re not my mother then who is?”

“Sweetheart.” Reina leans forward to take my hands in hers. They’re warm and soft, but I feel no greater energy, no sign that we might have a connection beyond that of strangers. “Your mother – your only mother, is the Goddess.”

Chapter 258 – Answers at Last

Ella

“You’re not my mother?” I whisper, my voice positively tiny. Looking at Reina, it makes sense. She’s tall and willowy, with black hair, olive skin and dark eyes – just about my polar opposite. I’m recalling Henry telling me that I don’t resemble her or Xavier, so I must take after the Goddess, but I didn’t truly understand how great the dissimilarity was until this moment. It seems a silly question now; of course she’s not my mother. How could she be?

The weight of my crushed hopes batter me from every direction, as if they aren’t simply falling from above, but closing in around me, suffocating and strangulating. They’re all watching me with the same sympathetic expression: Reina, the priests and Roger. Only Cora refuses to pity me, choosing instead to offer our hosts a death stare for upsetting me.

“Ella, please sit down.” Reina pleads, pulling me back over to the fire. “If you’ll listen, we’ll explain everything.”

“Okay. I manage to utter weakly, reclaiming my seat. “Explain.”

Reina clasps her hands in her lap, taking a deep breath. “When I married Xavier, I had my entire life planned out. I would finish school, wait a year or two before trying for pups, maybe work a little. All in all I expected to spend the first years of my union learning to be a queen and preparing to ascend to the throne in another decade or so. Then Xavier’s father died suddenly and unexpectedly, and all at once my plans fell apart. We were coronated when I was just 22.”

She pauses to sip her tea, and though the flavor is sweet her lips form a grimace. “Xavier and I chose one another. He’d rejected his fated mate and all his parents’ plans for an arranged marriage, and all for me. At the time it was romantic, I felt like I was living a fairytale. And then things changed... or perhaps the problem is that they weren’t changing.” Her eyes drop to my pregnant belly, and the muscle in her cheek twitches. “I had half a dozen miscarriages before the doctors told me to stop trying... they said I’d kill myself if I continued.”

My cheeks are wet, as if her words flipped on a switch in my brain and opened the dam. “I’m so sorry.” I profess, “I know what it’s like to struggle with infertility but I never... I’m just so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Reina purses her lips, and I wonder if she truly means it. “You wouldn’t be here if I’d been able to conceive, and we would all be the worse for it.”

“I’m still sorry.” I repeat, wanting to hug her but not trusting my ability to get out of my

chair without assistance.

“I appreciate that.” Reina replies, softening slightly as she continues with her tale. “Of course, Xavier was at a loss. His greatest responsibility as King was to produce heirs and carry on his bloodline. My inability... my failure made that impossible. We were stuck. Xavier couldn’t reject me – not when I was crowned queen and not after he’d made such a fuss about choosing me in the first place, though he probably should have.” An expression of torment crosses her pretty features. “More than once over the years I’ve thought this all could have been avoided if he hadn’t rejected his fated mate. They would have produced heirs, the monarchy would never have been in threat, and his sons would have taken over when he died.”

“And we’ve reminded Reina that this was all put in motion by much greater forces than the workings of a few power-hungry shifters.” Silas chimes in, using a gentle tone that indicates they’ve discussed this many times indeed. “The God of Darkness has been at work for centuries.” Reina inhales a steadying breath as she meets Silas’s gaze, nodding in appreciation. “Well, however it came about, that was the beginning of the end for me and Xavier. All the things that had seemed so romantic when we first fell in love... all the sacrifices he made for me... they became naught but resentments. He blamed me for everything that went wrong in his life from then on, and I could see him reframing the things he once loved about me as annoyances.”

Her eyes fall shut, and I can almost feel her pain. “A couple of times when he became very drunk, I caught him looking at me with such hatred in his eyes that I actually worried he might try to kill me just to get me out of the way. It was as if I had become this insurmountable hurdle standing between him and everything he’d ever wanted...” When her lashes rise again they’re wet with tears. “He forgot he wanted me once.”

“So I did the only thing I could,” Reina shrugs, “I prayed. I’d prayed to the Goddess for all my babies, but I’d never felt so utterly desperate. It was no longer simply a matter of wanting to be a mother, it was a matter of my entire future happiness, my marriage and possibly even my survival. I’d never been so low before.” She lifts her eyes heavenward, to the open ceiling and the stars above us. “I never dreamed she would respond in person.”

“She appeared to me as if she’d been there all along – one moment I was alone and weeping, the next I was awake with this glowing being before me. It physically hurt to look at her, as if I knew I was gazing upon something I was never meant to see.” Reina’s attention turns back to me, and I’m surprised to see she’s smiling. “You look so much like her, Ella. All of the beauty but none of the pain. ”

“So what happened?” Cora asks, leaning in as if she worries Reina might stop her story here. “She asked me why I wanted a child.” Reina replies, her gaze flitting to a vast moon dial in the center of the room, checking the time. “So I told her that it was my duty,

but more than that, that it was my greatest wish to be a mother. Then she asked why she should grant my wish over the thousands of other mothers in the world, and I explained that my child wouldn't merely be for myself, but for all the united packs. My child would become King one day, and not having one meant risking a power vacuum."

Reina pauses then, clearly getting caught up in her memories. "When she told me that she would give me a baby I thought I might faint, but my joy was only temporary. Because next the Goddess shared her own story with me, the details of our world's creation, the peril we would all be facing one day. She explained that there was no stopping this war, but that the child I bore might allow us to survive it." Reina recalls, "I didn't really understand, or know what to think. It was all too surreal."

"Then the Goddess told me that I wouldn't get to keep you. I was so angry and outraged, I demanded to know why on earth I would torture myself carrying a baby I'd be forced to give up... Reina's lips go very thin as she nods slowly, with the bearing of one who does not wish to remember this at all, "And that's when she explained that Xavier took me to bed that night, it would be her child in my womb, rather than my own. I would be like a surrogate for her and the King not that he ever knew anything about it." She shrugs as she watches me, her eyes welling over again. "In some ways it made it much easier to give you up, because you weren't truly mine."

I shake my head, unable to stay seated a moment longer. I manage to hoist myself out of my chair and cross to her side. The idea of anyone asking a woman who cannot have children of her own to carry theirs is a cruelty beyond imagining. I can't find any words to express the depth of my horror and sorrow for her, so I simply wrap my arms around Reina and squeeze. She gasps in surprise, but gradually returns my embrace, leaning into me.

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"I tried not to love you, not to get attached." Reina explains, weeping into my neck. "But I should have known better. Even humans fall in love with their babies before they're born — and they aren't bonded. I did have fun with you though, I loved being a living miracle, I held onto you as long as I possibly could. Then Silas and Pollux came to take you — I never knew where you went." "And Xavier?" Roger interjects, "how much did he know?"

"None of it." Reina reveals grimly. "After so many miscarriages, it came as no surprise when I told him the child didn't survive."

"So my father never even knew I existed?" I assess, my throat thick with emotion..

"I told him on his deathbed." Reina shares. "We got through the next twenty-five years in a tense partnership. We were no longer lovers or even friends, but bound together by our roles as leaders. I learned to feel safe with him again, and he learned to accept

reality – though it took him a few years to stop flailing in protest. He was pleased Ella... when I told him about you, he said he wished he could have met you.”

I sniff as I process this information. “Did the Goddess tell you how I’m supposed to save our future?”

“No.” Reina dashes my hopes. “That, she will have to tell you herself.”

I untangle myself from her arms. “What do you mean?”

Reina gives me a wry smile, “You didn’t think she was going to miss your homecoming, did you?”

I can only blink, still not understanding. Then Pollux stands, “she’s here.”

Chapter 259 – The Goddess

Ella

Seeing the Goddess again is like something out of a dream. Naturally, my memories of our first meeting have been restored, but the events my hypnosis sessions uncovered feel slightly different from my other memories – less solid, more malleable and illusive. This feels much the same. There's a surreal ambience in the air as the doors to the inner temple swing open, and it only grows stronger when the Goddess appears.

At first, there is only light. It pours forth from the expanding entryway in a blinding aura, forcing me to avert my gaze. Beside me, I feel Cora throw up a hand to block this show of celestial brilliance – not that it does much good. I feel as though my skin is on fire, and then a strange pressure deep in my chest. I feel as though something inside me is cracking open, and I instinctively fold in on myself, trying to keep it closed. Philippe is muttering worried questions by my side, his strong hand on my elbow, but I can't bring myself to look at him.

Audible Gift Memberships

My attention is locked on the being now framed in the doorway of the gleaming inner temple. The overwhelming light has dissipated now, leaving only the beautiful woman from my memory. I lift my gaze to her face, still grimacing with the effort of keeping myself in one piece. She's exactly as I remember her: too magnificent to take in all at once, and yet so fascinating that I could easily get lost in a single one of her features and never grow tired. There's the same starlit hair, galaxy eyes and pearly skin. But this time when our eyes meet, I feel a new pulse from that cracked place inside me. Oddly enough, it reminds me of my bond with Rafe.

The shock of this realization staggers me, so much so that I lose control and stop trying to cement the burgeoning crack. At once the walls seem to collapse, and suddenly I'm feeling a third bond in addition to Sinclair and Rafe's. It's filled to bursting with love and power, and a great many things I don't understand. The link is so replete with magic that I feel a bit drunk, but I know I have to keep going.

My wolf inches forward, testing the new channel in our consciousness. It's every bit as strong as those I share with my son and mate, though alarmingly vast and unfamiliar. I know the feel of my boys with my eyes closed, but pinpointing a single shape, emotion or thought from the Goddess is impossible. It's daunting – but not unpleasant. I can feel so much warmth and affection radiating towards me, with the same sort of unconditional fervor I feel for my unborn pup. It fills me with a sense of safety, security and belonging, in ways no one else has been able to provide for me. Tentatively, I send a single question through the bond and hold my breath as I wait for an answer. The Goddess hasn't looked away from me once since she arrived, and now she floats forward, her cascading gown trailing over the hallowed ground. "Yes, Ella." She confirms with a

tender smile, her shimmering hand cupping my cheek. “This is what it feels like to have a mother.”

Her touch is so soft and nurturing that tears sting my eyes, and all I want to do is throw myself into her arms. I don’t, unsure of what is appropriate and how I’m even supposed to behave in this situation. However the Goddess obviously senses it, because she wraps me up in her willowy arms, “I’ve been waiting for this day for longer than you know.” She murmurs in my ear. “Even before you were conceived, I have always looked forward to meeting you, my daughter.”

“But we already met.” I sniffie, nuzzling her shoulder and taking the opportunity to breathe in her scent. I almost regret this, because her aroma is a terrifying blend of everything in the universe.

All the life her light created is now embedded in her pores, competing for attention and rushing to the surface in microscopic bursts. There are plant and animal smells, as well as those of minerals and chemicals – and then about a million things I don’t think I want to know about.

“I know,” The Goddess answers, pulling away to look down at me with a serene smile. “You were so tiny and precious, but it was only a blip in time. I want to know the woman you’ve become.”

“Will we have the opportunity for that?” I inquire warily, “Reina, Silas and Pollux keep telling me I’m too late.”

She sighs, “We have a lot to talk about, my darling. And you’ve only just arrived. Wouldn’t you like a rest?”

“No.” I counter, tempted to put some distance between us, but unable to release her. “I’m too hyper to ever sleep now. I need to know what’s happening.”

“Very well then.” The Goddess concedes, “Reina?” She sweeps her hand towards the inner temple, and one by one we file inside. I introduce Cora, Roger and Philippe, and I’m infinitely grateful that they continue to refuse to leave me alone with these mysterious characters, no matter how many times they’re asked.

“Where should we begin?” Reina inquires once we’re all seated and drinking a fresh brew of tea. “I know where.” I declare. I’ve been keeping the former queen in my periphery this entire time, and I didn’t miss the pain in her eyes when she witnessed our reunion. “I want you to know that I think what you did to Reina is horrible.” I begin, leveling a scowl at my mother. “To grant her wish only to rip it all away? It’s unforgivable. And why did you tell me Reina was one of my mothers if she wasn’t?”

The Goddess arches one silvery brow, cocking her head to the side as she observes me. “Wasn’t she? She loved you, sheltered and carried you. She sacrificed her body and her freedom once she lost her husband, and all for you.”

“You know what I mean.” I counter, taking Reina’s hand in my own. I wish I had a way to communicate my appreciation and affection for the she-wolf beyond small touches, but at this point it’s the best I can do.”

“I needed you to find this place, Ella.” The Goddess replies, her voice light and airy. “You had to come looking for Reina, so that we could have this meeting. So that we can begin your training.” “I don’t understand.” I confess, reaching for Cora with my free hand. She quickly cuddles up to my side, surrounding me with support. “Why couldn’t you carry me yourself?” I inquire, glancing apologetically at Reina. “Not because I wanted you too... I just don’t understand?”

“I do not create life in the same way humans and shifters do.” The Goddess shares. “I can dream entire worlds into being, but the only being capable of impregnating me would be the God of Darkness. And it would have meant an immortal child – one who could never know what it truly means to be human.”

“Oh.” I muse, wondering if any of this will ever begin sounding believable.

“The world doesn’t need another god with more power than they know what to do with.” The Goddess continues, looking around at us all. “I needed a child with shifter blood and my power in one. So the best I could do was implanting one of my eggs in Reina, and giving Xavier a push to her bed.”

“And everything that happened after?” I ask, not trying to disguise the pain in my voice. “The orphanage? Binding my wolf? Those visits from Silas and Pollux! What on earth was the deal with that knife in the forest?”

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“You know some of the answers already.” My mother reminds me softly. “We needed you to know what it meant to be human, but it wasn’t enough to merely leave you with them and binding your wolf. We knew you had my power. We knew you had the experiences to give you perspective – but we had to find out if you were capable of uniting our worlds, and that part has nothing to do with power or perspective. It’s about you. We didn’t know your heart or who you would become.” “But I thought this was the whole reason I was born!” I exclaim, needing to make sense of this. “It was a hope.” The Goddess replies. “I am not omniscient, and I do not control the workings of men. I knew a child of your lineage and experience would have the potential to save your people, but the rest was up to you. We needed to see if you would fight, if you would protect and sacrifice your own needs for others. Luckily you grew up to be the woman I hoped, but

none of this is guaranteed.”

“Alright,” I swallow, deciding to wait and process all of this later. It’s simply too much to compute in this moment. “So... what training? What am I supposed to do? If it’s not about magic –”

“If we can win the war, your heart will bring our people together, not your power.” She answers evenly, “but to win the war? Damon is not as weak as you may think, Ella. Your mate is going to need your help, and that means learning how to use your magic – and we hardly have any time left.”

“I still don’t understand.” I whimper, wishing Sinclair was here.

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“That’s okay, my love.” The Goddess runs her fingers through my hair almost absentmindedly. “All will be clear in time. Now – Are you ready to begin?”

Chapter 260 – No Boys Allowed

Ella

“I’m ready,” I reply, straightening my shoulders and sitting up, away from my mother, who is also the Goddess. “What do I need to do?”

“You must go,” she urges, her eyes clear and untroubled despite the turmoil in mine. “Into the desert beyond this temple. There, I can communicate more clearly, more fully. I will make your path clear to you.”

“Seriously?” I cry, wrinkling my nose in distaste and looking over my shoulder to where the desert surely waits. “Out into the desert? It’s not something that we can do here, in the comfort of this really nice temple?” My wolf inside me howls at the idea – she wants trees and shade and cool damp places, not the hot desert sun.

The Goddess smiles at me and shakes her head lightly, her glowing blonde hair shaking over her shoulders. “No, my child,” she intones. “You must learn the lessons that this earth has to teach you, and it’s not something you can glean from a structure built by man.” Her eyes drift, then, to my stomach, where my child is growing. “It will be dangerous for you,” she whispers. “You are weaker than you think, girl.”

My stomach sinks at her words and my hands fly to my stomach, instantly wanting to protect my little boy. “Will it...will it hurt him? To learn what I need to know?”

She looks at me evenly, not giving a hint of affirmation or denial. “The future is not written, my child,” she whispers, her voice soft. “Your body is weak, but your child is strong. Your time in the desert will be a trial, your deliverance of my gift to your people will be worse. It is your choice, whether to take these risks upon your body. And in the end, there is no guarantee that it will work. You are...late. The war is well progressed. Those against whom you fight are strong.”

I look around the room at everyone, all of their eyes and their hopes trained upon me in this instant. My hands move over my stomach as I look each of them in the face, but my heart is with my little boy – our little boy, mine and Sinclair’s. This miracle we made together.

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I would do anything to save him, to keep him safe. This I know as a truth as deep as my soul, deep as my love for Sinclair. But I think as well of the world he’ll grow up in if I do nothing. A world torn apart by war, in which he will always be hunted, always be a target. And one day he’ll grow big and strong, like his father – big enough to take it all on. But until then, when he is just an innocent child...

Until then, it's my job to fight for him.

"All right," I choke out, my fear as well as my determination shining on my face. "All right, I'll do it. Let's go."

My mother gives me a soft, worried smile and leans forward, taking my face in her glowing hands. "I will be with you every step," she murmurs, her voice soft enough that I'm the only one to hear it. "Do not doubt that I am there, guiding you, little one." Then, pressing a kiss to my forehead, she begins to glow with a fierce, burning light.

As she pulls away, she turns to Cora and gives her a bright smile. Cora blinks her surprise, shocked to be singled out by the Goddess. And then, all at once, the light is blinding, forcing all of us to close our eyes against the glare. When we open them again, the Goddess is gone and the room is cast in relative darkness.

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"What!" Cora cries, jumping to her feet and looking around. "But she didn't give us any instructions – what are we supposed to do!?"

"No," I whisper, shaking my head at my sister. "No, I know what to do." I press my hand to my forehead, where the goddess had pressed her kiss. With it, she gave me her love, but also all of the instructions I need to carry us forward. "Come," I order, getting to my feet definitively. "We have far to go, and not much time."

Everyone stands, ready for action, ready to follow me out into the desert to meet whatever the Goddess holds for us there.

In the end, we don't all go into the desert. Instead, it is only Cora, Regina, and I who prepare to set out into the sands. Roger puts up the biggest fuss at being left behind, of course.

"I can't let you go out there alone," he growls at me, though his eyes are on Cora the whole time. "I promised Dominic that I'd keep you safe –"

"It doesn't matter what you promised," Regina intones evenly, coming over to us when she hears him putting up a fight. "This desert is sacred to the Goddess, it is no place for a man." She looks him up and down, a bit of a sneer on her face.

"And them?" Roger snaps, throwing an arm towards the priests who work the temple. "You're going to tell me that they've never been out there?"

Regina glances calmly over at the priests and then turns her gaze back to Roger. "They are castrati," she says, raising her eyebrows. "Unless you'd like to join their number...?"

I burst out laughing at this and slap a hand over my mouth to muffle the sound. It feels wrong, somehow, to laugh like that in the goddess' temple – but the look on Roger's face when Regina so casually offered to take his balls away –

I glance at Cora and almost lose it again when I see that she's also holding back her hysterical laughter.

Regina raises disapproving brows at us, but walks quickly away to where preparations are being made, too busy to scold.

"Well, Roger?" Cora asks, crossing her arms and smirking at him. "You gonna... lighten your load? And join us out in the sand?"

I hear the growl deepen in my mate's Beta's chest and take two steps towards him, putting my hands on his arm and looking up at him with my sweetest sisterly gaze. "Come on, Roger," I coax. We need someone to ready the ship, anyway – when we get finished with what we have to do out there, we're going to need to move. Fast."

Cora says nothing, just continues smirking, even when he turns his heavy gaze on her. I see the longing in his eyes, the worry that's not simply the assignment given to him by his brother, but the worry of a wolf for the woman he loves. Looking between them, I can feel his anxiety in the air, as well as Cora's daring. If Cora had a wolf, I know that right now it would be crouching in her mind, her hackles raised, her tail slowly wagging, thinking come get me.

But, as much as I'd like to see this play out, we're out of time. "Well, whatever," I breathe, stretching my arms over my head and pretending a nonchalance I don't feel. "If you want to come, Roger, we'll see you out back once you've had your uh –" I flick my eyes to his crotch, letting my gaze linger there, "load lightened." Then I look back up at him with a big smile. "Otherwise, we'll see you at the boat!"

I turn, moving to Cora and wrapping my arm around hers, pulling her away with me.

"How long will it take?" Roger calls after us, his hands sunk angrily in his pockets.

I look over my shoulder and shrug at him. "Honestly?" I say, shaking my head. "I don't know. Hours. Days. Weeks? It will take as long as it takes,"

He growls again and opens his mouth to reply but Regina opens a door at the back of the temple, waving us forward towards the dark room there.

"Come," she demands, lowering her brows at us. "There is no time for this nonsense. We have work to do."

Nodding, chastened, Cora and I duck through the low lintel of the door, into the coolness of the dark room. But I don't miss the glance Cora sends to Roger over her shoulder. The one that promises a return, no matter how long it takes.

Chapter 261 – Ella Goes Into the desert

Ella

In the darkness of the back room, Regina instructs us to strip down to our skins and then hands us two rough robes that we pull over our heads, hardly more than bleached potato sacks with cowl necks and long sleeves.

“Is this part of the ceremony?” I ask, curious and disliking the feel of the fabric on my skin. Honestly, given my choices I’d rather wear the leggings and simple shirt that I arrived in.

Audible Gift Memberships

“No,” Regina answers, looking at me evenly, not a hint of emotion on her face. “It will simply keep you cool in the heat of the desert. But your nakedness beneath,” she notes, letting her eyes travel down my small body beneath my robe, “that is to honor the goddess. When you perform the ceremony, you must be naked before the moon. You can bring nothing with you from your earthly life.”

I run my fingers lightly over the claiming mark between my neck and shoulder, suddenly glad that wolves don’t do wedding rings. I’m not sure I could leave this memory of my mate behind, even to lay myself bare before the Goddess. My fingers move again to my stomach, and I look down again to the swell of my child.

“Will it matter?” I ask, suddenly looking up at Regina. “That my child is a boy? Like, if there are no boys allowed on this trip

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Regina smiles slightly, coming forward and laying a hand on my cheek. I stop mid-sentence, surprised to see her express any positive emotion at all.

“While he is within you, he is part of you, and part of the sacred cycle of womanhood. He will be safe, child, have no fear.” Her eyes crinkle a little as her smile deepens. “A boy, then? How wonderful. A blessing for the kingdom.”

I join her in smiling and give a little nod. A blessing indeed, though I admit I hadn’t really thought about his role in the kingdom. But if Sinclair did win this war, then he would be King, and his son...

Well. Questions for another day. My wolf yips within me, somehow sensing in a way that I do not our need to get moving.

“The sun is falling,” Regina declares, taking her hand from my face and walking towards

another door on the far side of the room. "It is time to go." With that, she opens the door wide, revealing the golden desert beyond. "Let us begin."

Cora and I give each other a glance and then, together, head through the door.

Cora, Regina, and I walk through the white sands of the desert, which now glow orange in the light of the setting sun. It's an incredible sight, the way the entire landscape seems to take on the nature of the sun, glowing and hot and alive. I look out over it admiringly, wondering if this is the sun putting on a last show before the moon takes its place as queen of the night.

I walk at the head of the group. Regina is, technically, our leader, but I'm the one with the soul bond to the Goddess now, to my mother. I shake my head, still marveling over that fact. I had always wondered who my mother was and never, ever, had this possibility come into my mind. As we walk and the sun takes its final dip below the horizon, my hand again drifts to my stomach.

Will it make a difference in my son's life, having a goddess as a grandmother?

Will he, too, have powers?

And what were mine?

I sigh, knowing that I'll have answers soon enough, but wanting them now now now so I can get out of this scratchy potato sack, away from this place, and back to Sinclair. My wolf gives a restless little stir inside of me, wanting to be with him, in his arms, smelling his delicious scent...

"Ella," Regina warns, her voice low. "Pay attention."

I give her a little apologetic grimace and look around, realizing that we've reached the crest of a dune and that the desert is spread out below us. Night fell without my noticing and above us, stretching huge above the sky, a full moon hangs.

"We are lucky." Regina murmurs, looking up at it. Cora and I follow her gaze. "The full moon will make the connection stronger."

"This is it," I declare, nodding with certainty. I don't know how I know, but I know. I feel it, in my bones and my stomach. Inside me, my wolf turns in a circle and curls up, alert but content. We have reached the place we're supposed to be. I do a little turn, marveling out at the silvery desert spread around us, the shadows of the dunes purple and blue to match the richness of the velvet sky. It's an incredible sight. I wonder, passingly, how many have had the chance to see it. For a brief moment, I feel myself blessed.

“What do we do now?” Cora asks, likewise looking all around. As beautiful as it is, we are in an empty place. There is nothing here to with any script regarding what to do next.

“Sit,” Regina instructs, pulling her garment over her head in a single graceful movement and spreading it out on the ground. Then, she folds her legs beneath her and sits patiently upon it. Wait.”

I wrinkle my nose at the idea of waiting. Though I know this is where I need to be, and my wolf is calm inside of me, I still want to be home in his arms

—

“Ella,” Regina warns again, giving me a stern look. I frown at her. How did she know what I was thinking about? “Concentrate.”

I sigh and nod, knowing that I have a job to do. Then, I pull my potato sack over my head and spread it on the stand before sink to my knees on top of it. I place my hands on my thighs, sitting my butt back on my heels. Cora sits down next to me on her own bit of fabric, staring up at the moon, and I close my eyes, slowing my breathing. I’m not really someone who meditates – who has time for that? – but I know, somehow, that this is what I need to do.

“Breathe,” Regina instructs, and I start taking deep breaths, letting my mind wind down to its basest state, trying to clear all my thoughts and make space for the Goddess to do her work.

It takes a minute before I notice a change. But then, slowly, in the darkness of my closed eyes, as if on the back of my eyelids, a small purple light begins to glow. I barely notice it, register it as strange, until it begins to pulse lightly and then spread. The growth is slow, just—a minute bit at a time, but, eventually, the purple light takes over the space of my entire internal vision.

And then, I gasp.

Inside my head, my mind, my body, I feel the shuddering warmth of my mother’s love. And it’s an incredible thing, because it’s a love for me, specifically, but also, somehow, a love for everyone. I am filled with it, with my mother’s ceaseless love, with the love of a mother for her child, with the dedication of a moon for the earth around which it orbits.

And then, very suddenly, I know. I understand. I have everything I need, inside of me.

When I open my eyes, I see Regina still sitting quietly with her eyes closed. Cora, however, is starting at me dumbfounded.

“Ella,” she whispers. “You’re...you’re glowing.”

I give her a smile and look down at my arms, somehow not surprised to see that I am glowing – or shimmering, or something. With a glorious silver–white light.

“Cool,” I murmur, admiring it. Then, I look back to my sister. “Are you ready to go?”

“Is...is that it?” she asks, hesitant. “Do you know like...what to do?”

I nod, my smile growing. “Yeah, it’s way simpler than I thought it would be.” Then, I push myself to my feet, shaking out my sack and pulling it again over my head.

I take a few steps towards Cora, then, but a sudden wave of dizziness overtakes me the moment I do. Cora is on her feet in an instant, Regina next to her, and I stumble into Cora’s arms, feeling my breath come short.

“Oh my god,” I murmur, looking up at Regina. “I feel like...why am I so weak?”

“The ceremony has taxed you,” Regina warns, “you must take care.” Then, she turns to Cora. “Come, we must get her back to your ship. The time is short.”

With that, Regina stoops under my arm, wrapping it around her shoulder, supporting my weight. Cora, on my other side, does the same. Together, we begin the journey back, and I’m horrified to find that every step is a struggle for me.

Worse, as much as I search for it...I can’t feel my bond to Rafe. Not anywhere.

My dear readers, Thank you for stopping by and reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it. I’m trying my best to update asap. I’ll appreciate it if you explore my other stories as well. Please follow my f*****k page Caroline above story and group Caroline above story if you wanna chat or keep updated on my writing schedule. Yours, Caroline above story

Chapter 262 – War

Sinclair

God damn it, I think, looking around at the hastily set-up headquarters that looks like a little more than a rickety table surrounded by anxious wolves. If this isn't hell, then I don't know what is. We arrived at the edge of the capital days ago and set up here, in an abandoned warehouse that Damon didn't bother protecting because it's not worth his time.

A mistake, I think, one of many that he's making. The fact is that Damon made a huge misstep in releasing the secret of our being to the humans he expected, I think, to cow them with fear, to take control of their resources and use them against mine. What he didn't expect was that the humans would entrench and fight back. And now, his army is fighting on two fronts – against the humans and against me – stretched thin. Being pulled in two directions is making him miss things, like this warehouse at the edge of his territory, which we were able to sneak into and set up shop.

Still, though, looking around, it's nothing like the quality of accommodation that I'm used to. The walls are crumbling, the ceiling has fallen in a few places, and what rusted rafters are left look ready to fall down at any moment. My wolf grumbles within me, pacing unhappily. Let's get this moving, he growls, we have to get back to her – we have to get to the baby –

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"I know," I mumble to myself aloud, angry. God damn it, I know. I don't need my wolf inside me constantly nagging me about it. My mind is on her every minute my beautiful mate, with her rose-gold hair and that troublesome smirk. God, what I could do to those smirking lips if she were here now with that teasing mouth. I'd use my tongue to part those lips, slip inside. I'd holding her against every inch of me while I tasted her, feeling her moan reverberate in my own mouth...

I press my eyes tightly shut, forcing my mind back to the subject at hand and gritting my teeth almost to dust as I dismiss these thoughts of what I'm going to do to my mate the moment I have her in my arms again. This is better, at least, than the thoughts of what can go wrong with her not by my side at every moment, but –

–

Damn it. I take a deep breath and open my eyes, forcing myself to look at the tactical maps on the table in front of me. This would all be much easier if she was here with me, so that I could protect her. I can't stand her being away. Inside of me, my wolf gives a little howling yip of agreement. He wants her back too, wants her near.

“Sir,” James says, walking over to the table where I consult with a handful of the other Alphas.” The mission is in place. We are ready to proceed.”

I take a deep breath, straightening up from the table and looking around at the men around me. Okay, everyone,” I snap. “This is the big push. Our only shot at the element of surprise. Are we ready?”

We’ve been working on this plan for days, putting it together piece by piece. Everything needs to happen just so but...if it works? We could take the city by nightfall. Around me, all of the Alphas nod. Everything in its place, everyone ready, It’s zero hour and time to attack.

“Goddess’s speed, then,” I growl, my eyebrows drawn down and my eyes alight with the fire of the wolf within me. “And good luck.” With that, everyone springs to action. And the war truly begins.

3rd Person

Damon stands at the head of the empty table in his board room, his arms crossed, his gaze fixed on the door. His left eye twitches slightly with the intensity of his gaze. Any minute now, he thinks, almost willing the door to open so that his plans can finally come to fruition. He received a message this morning, from his ally. We’ve got him.

That’s all it said, but that was all he had needed to hear. He knew that he could use Sinclair’s foolish trust in his so-called allies against him. That all it would take was one well-placed bribe, and all of his little soldiers would fall one by one. Like dominoes.

As the prince stares, the door begins to creek open. With it, Damon’s smile grows.

“Welcome, Kieran,” Damon purrs, quickly scanning the group he sees before him. “So nice to see you on this...momentous occasion.”

“My Prince,” Kieran replies, giving him a deep bow.

“King, now,” Damon growls, glaring at the weak Alpha to whom he has promised a kingdom. Promised, Damon thinks, but not yet delivered. He smiles at his own cleverness, knowing that this is just the start of his plans.

“King when you are crowned,” Kieran replies evenly, stepping into the room. “Until then? Prince”

—

“Formalities,” Damon snaps, watching the rest of Kieran’s group filter in. Guards, mostly

– his own, as well as Kieran’s – the stupid man had insisted upon his own troupe – but... there. Damon’s grin glows as he sees Alpha Sinclair being dragged into the room, his huge shoulders struggling against the chains wrapped around him, against the handcuffs behind his back.

The guards bring Sinclair forward, throwing him to the floor at Damon’s feet.

“Well well,” Demon teases, his cruel smile showing all of his wicked teeth. “How the mighty have fallen.”

Sinclair glares at him from his spot on his knees, shouting some curses that are muffled by his gag. Damon just laughs, lowering his face so that it’s nearly even with Sinclair’s.

“Do you not wish,” Damon jeers softly, “that you had just bent the knee weeks ago? When you had a chance? All of this could have been avoided. You would have been powerful, under my rule. Comfortable. At peace. And now? Now you have lost everything.”

Sinclair glares at Damon as if the look could burn him. As if he could light him on fire with just the force of his eyes. Damon just laughs, straightening up and shaking his head at the man.

“I don’t like this,” Kieran insists, looking around the room anxiously, drawing Damon’s eyes to him. “Killing him like this – I don’t think it will have the effect you think it will”

“Cut the head off the snake,” Damon responds, his voice harsh. “And the body will...” he draws a hand through the air and then lets it fall limply to his side. “Die.”

“I don’t think it works like that here,” Kieran refutes, shaking his head. “It’s not like with you, with one leader to whom everyone bows. In the past weeks Sinclair has rallied many to his cause – has convinced them of the morality of his position. If you kill him here,” Kieran looks seriously at Damon, hoping he will understand. “Another will simply rise to take his place. Perhaps you should let him go, or keep him as prisoner instead. Don’t make a martyr for them to rally around.”

“Never,” Damon snarls, glaring at Kieran. “He will die today, solidifying my position as King. And if you suggest any alternative again, you will go with him. Am I made clear?” The last word is a horrible growl that sends shivers down Kieran’s spine. His eyes go wide as he takes a step back, clearly believing Damon. “Besides,” Damon continues, looking back towards his prize, taking pleasure at how Sinclair looks on his knees. “I’m going to enjoy killing this one. And we wouldn’t want to take away any of my fun. I’ve been deprived for so long.”

Damon takes his time pulling a wickedly bladed knife from his belt, pressing it close to

Sinclair's throat. "After all," he whispers, low enough that Sinclair is the only one who can hear. "It's been so long since I killed your first mate. And then I'll take you. And then, when I'm done, I'll bring this knife to your new mate's pretty little neck. And I'll drink the blood I spill with it."

A menacing snarl rips from Sinclair's throat as he hears this threat. As the knife presses closer, a single drop of blood begins to drip down his neck.

Chapter 263 – Twisting the Knife

3rd Person

“Now!” Kieran shouts, just as the knife starts to draw Sinclair’s blood, just as he was instructed to do. The blood, after all, would throw Damon’s guards into a frenzy, giving Kieran and his men the slight advantage they will need to pull this off.

At his word, every single one of his guards goes into action, turning on the royal guard closest to him and engaging in battle. Damon was no fool, of course – Kieran had been allowed to bring only a few guards, not so many that they outnumbered Damon’s. It was a risk, engaging the enemy when outnumbered, but it one they had to take.

As Kieran too whips a knife from its hiding place in his boot, Sinclair whips his body away from Damon, sheering the skin of his neck across the length of the blade but avoiding any true wounds. Rolling away from the prince, Sinclair roars, ripping his gag away with the force of his jaw, twisting his wrists and wrenching his handcuffs apart at the weakened center chain that his men had placed there just for this moment. Sinclair then makes quick work of the chains wrapped around his shoulders placed there for show, rather than for restraint – and turns on Damon.

The glow still burns in Sinclair’s eyes, but now a deep and hungry grin spreads across his face as well. The prince goes pale. “Mine,” Sinclair growls. “You are mine, and it is your blood that I will lick from my teeth when this is finished.”

Barely a moment passes before the prince responds, throwing himself as far from Sinclair’s grasp as he can as Sinclair takes a mighty swipe at him, the claws growing from the edges of his fingertips as he moves. A chase begins, with the Prince moving away from Sinclair as quickly as he can and shifting as he goes. Sinclair gives chase like lightening, taking his own gigantic wolf form to face the prince’s.

The prince and the alpha ignore the other battle across the room, though Kieran glances their way when he can. The gambit seems to have paid off the prince’s guards, distracted by the scent of blood in the air, were not expecting the assault. Prepared for the blood, Kieran’s guards press their advantage, slaughtering as quickly as they can, dispatching the prince’s forces until they are even. Sinclair’s teeth pull back from his slaving jaws as he stalks slowly towards the prince, backing him into a corner. One huge paw slams on the ground after another, coming ever closer to his prey, his hackles high, his nose wrinkled and tense with his rage, his fury, his need to kill.

–

How dare Damon – on top of everything he had done – how dare he threaten Ella, his perfect mate. The thought of Damon with her blood on his hands, licking it from his paws Sinclair with a fury that lights his own blood on fire. He will see this wolf in pieces today,

torn it fills apart with his own jaws.

Damon doges back and forth in the corner, his tail low between his legs but his ears pinned back in a snarl. He knows he is at the disadvantage – that there's no way he can take on Sinclair's gigantic wolf alone. But still he is not without his own advantages – Damon is clever, ruthless, and fast. And has nothing to lose, whereas Sinclair has everything.

—

As Sinclair draws close enough to strike, Damon feints left and then dashes right, squirming past Damon's snapping jaws and darting under the table, seeking to get to his men, to hide behind their safety and regroup –

Just as his forelegs disappear under the table, though, a great crack sounds through the air and a horrible howl. Even the guards across the room, caught in their own battle, pause at the sound, twisting to see Sinclair hauling Damon out from beneath the table, the prince's twisted back leg held tight in his jaws.

With all of his might, Sinclair hauls the other wolf into the air, slamming his body onto the table. The wolf yelps, the sound echoing through the room over the noise of his cracking bones. Kieran is the first to recover from his shock and horror, yelling "move!" to his forces, who press their attack, taking advantage of the distraction to cut the throats of some of the prince's guards, to trap and tie others, rending them useless.

As they work, Sinclair leaps onto the table, which shudders under his weight. He crawls over top of the smaller wolf's shuddering, whimpering form, his face still curled in a wolf's rage, his jaws slavering with his hunger for vengeance.

Beneath him, there is a flash, and then, in the blink of an eye, the wolf transforms back into its human form. The prince is so tiny below the gigantic wolf above him, his leg twisted unnaturally beneath him, his ribcage oddly flat in places it should not be.

"Please," the prince pants, looking up at the alpha above him with rage and fear in his eyes. Mercy

"

The wolf above the prince snarls dreadfully at the sound of the word, placing a paw on the center of his chest and pressing down, causing the prince to cry out in pain. Sinclair lowers his face until his fangs are just inches from the man's face, their eyes level. His fierce green gaze speaks his intention: he wants to let the man look one more time into the eyes of the wolf who will kill him. To know who, precisely, took his life. And why.

The prince's face twists, the fear turning into a nasty, pain-filled sneer as he spits up at Sinclair, the spittle missing its mark and flying back to smack onto the prince's cheek. "You pathetic excuse for an Alpha," he hisses, "you will never lead them – you will never –"

"

But his final words are lost to history as Sinclair raises his head to roar mightily to the sky and then snaps his head down, sinking his jaws deep into the prince's throat, and ripping it out. Blood pours from the man's neck as the light dies from his eyes and, slowly, Sinclair turns to look at Kieran, at his men, at the prince's guards either dead or incapacitated on the floor. Blood and gore drips from his maw and his piercing eyes are lit with an unearthly green light.

Slowly, a little awed, Kieran sinks to one knee. The surviving men they brought with them quickly follow suit, bowing their heads to Sinclair, who still stands as a wolf on the table, heaving heavy breaths.

"My King," Kieran murmurs.

There's a bright flash of light and suddenly the giant black wolf is gone, replaced with the Alpha who would be King. He stands on the table, looking down at his people, ignoring the corpse at his feet. Then, he raises his arm to wipe the blood from his face, licking the blood slowly from his teeth. Savoring it

"Come," Sinclair says to his men. "We have work to do."

Kieran and the men stand to attention as Sinclair steps down from the table, striding quickly past them out the door. This part, at least the killing of the prince had gone according to plan. But the rest

They walk to the front of the palace, out onto a third-floor balcony where they can see the war raging within the city itself.

"Release a statement to the press, photos," Sinclair orders, his voice low. "I want the prince's corpse on every news channel. Unlike our side, the prince truly was the head of the snake." He snaps his gaze over to Kieran. "With him gone, the wolves he led will fall in line under my control."

Kieran nods, agreeing, though his face is still worried. "Sir..."

"I know," Sinclair interrupts, his voice snapping as he turns his face back to the city. "That only ends half a war. What the hell was that man thinking, revealing our secret to the humans?"

“He underestimated them,” Kieran suggests, sinking his hands into his pockets and looking out at the smoke rising over the city. “Humans are not wolves, but they are not sheep either. They will fight for their freedom.”

“Now, our job is to convince them that we have no intention of taking it away,” Sinclair thinks aloud. “But how the hell can we do that?”

Chapter 264 – To the Temple

Ella

As soon as the boat pulls up to the dock, I'm by the gangplank, eagerly waiting for the sailors to lower it. One of my hands rests on the underside of my swollen belly, holding my child close. The doctor that Sinclair assigned to come with us examined me the moment we stepped foot onboard after our trek home from the desert and confirmed that Rafe's heartbeat is still there, though fainter than he'd like.

I need to get off this boat, now, I think, my eyes wide as I watch the sailors hurry to lower the plank so that I can scurry off of it. I have a job to do, and the sooner it's done, the sooner I can rest.

Stop, my wolf begs inside of me a word I don't think I've ever heard her say. She's usually run!, or fly! or go! Never stop, caution, wait. But today, I can feel her pacing inside me, worried.

We are weak, she cautions. The pup...

I can't, I growl back at her, impatiently watching the plank finally touch the dock next to us. We have a job to do – we have to help everyone survive

"Ella!" Cora calls, running out of the boat's small cabin. "Ella, wait!"

I turn to her, my face fierce. "Either come with me or stay here, Cora," I warn, my eyes flashing. But you can't hold me back –"

–

"Ella," she says, grabbing my arm as I put my foot on the gangplank, ready to rush forward." Please, you barely made it out of the desert – you are not well enough for this – your doctor ordered you onto bedrest weeks ago – he told you to walk no more than forty minutes a day! You're risking your health, your child!"

"And if I don't?" I bite out, spinning on her. "How many will die, if I don't get to that temple and deliver the Goddess's gift?" My eyes fill with tears and my lip trembles as I look my sister in the eye, my hand still pressed against my poor child. "Are their lives worth less than mine? Worth less than my child?"

"Yes," Cora says, and I can see her guilt as she utters the word. "At least, to me – Ella, I can't see you harmed like this –"

"Then stay," I declare, ripping my arm from her hand. "Don't watch. But you can't stop me."

Cora is right, of course I am weak, perhaps too weak to do this. But I can't not not anymore, not knowing what I know. I can do so much good if I can only get to those temple steps...

Free of her grasp, I hurry down the gangplank and am surprised to hear footsteps following me. When I stand firmly on the dock, I turn, my eyes going wide when I see Cora hurrying after me.

She shrugs when her feet too hit the wood.

"I can't let you go alone," she protests. "If you insist on killing yourself, I'm going to be there to witness it. You idiot."

I nod, ignoring the insult, and feel honestly a little lighter now that I have my sister at my side. I turn and as one we head out into the streets.

"Cora! Ella!" We hear Roger's voice call out behind us, but neither of us turn. If he wants to stop me,

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he's going to have to chase me, and damn it – weak or not – I'm faster than him. Cora and I pick up our pace, determined not to waste any more time on negotiations.

We plunge through the city, which is filled with smoke and rubble. I'm horrified by what I see. Some houses look almost untouched while others are in total ruin. Whole neighborhoods which I used to walk through are demolished, their beautiful tree-line streets ripped to shreds. It's horrible to see what Damon has done to this place, what the humans have been pushed to in order to keep hold of their freedom.

But if I do this right, if I can get there....damn it, but I can make a difference.

I caught a little sleep on the boat on the way here. My anxiety kept it light, kept me from the dream state that would have allowed me to speak to Sinclair if he, too, were dreaming. It was a huge disappointment, not to have been able to talk to him. Just one word from him, one embrace, one press of his hot mouth to mine

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It would have given me such strength. Instead, I feel my weakness in each of my steps. I feel as if I could sleep for days, my adrenaline the only thing that's keeping me going. And of course – of course I know that my poor baby is the one paying the price of all of this.

It's the cause of all of my anxiety, the only thing that I thought about during the long trip here. The all-encompassing question that kept me up at night: was my child the price we would pay for peace? And then, was it a price I was willing to pay?

Every motherly atom within me screams no, but the human in me – And yes, the human. Biologically, I am wolf, but I was raised as a human on purpose, so that in this moment I would know the meaning of the word. The human in me feels the suffering of thousands and knows that I must do this.

In the end, it comes down to my faith. My faith that my mate and I are strong, that our love is strong, that our bodies are strong, that the child we have made is strong. My son is the grandson of a Goddess – he is not made of tender stuff. He will not be snuffed out by the bringing of peace. And so, with clear eyes and a steady heart, I plunge through the war zone towards the temple. know is at the center of the city.

We arrive what feels like hours later, our breath coming short, our mouths wide as we pant. The Goddess's temple is a shining white building that stands across the street from the palace.

It's so obviously a temple, I think, leaning on Cora and catching my breath as we look across the palace square at it. What on earth did I think it was, before I found out about werewolves and wolf society? I shake my head clear of the question, though it's not important now.

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“Oh my god,” Cora gasps, grabbing my hand and pointing up at a huge screen on the left side of the square. It's on the side of one of our city's mega news organizations, a screen as wide as a billboard. And there, on it –

“Oh my god,” I echo, my eyes going wide as I see the graphic image of the prince's corpse laying on a board room table. Beneath it, text scrolls:

Prince Damon declared dead...forces requested to cease fire....Sinclair declared leader of all werewolf kind....peace talks to begin...

“Why,” Cora demands, looking around at the still-smoking city which still echoes with the sound of gunfire and bombs. “Why haven't they stopped, if the prince is dead?”

“Because,” I pant, my breath just now starting to come back to me. “The human's war was never with the prince – it was with all of us.” I shake my head at her. “It's humans versus werewolves now. This war has just begun.” My voice is desperate, shaking.

“Unless we can stop it,” Cora whispers, taking my hand. Her face takes on a new, determined look as she sets her jaw and then looks towards the temple. “Come on, Ella,” she demands, tugging me forward into the chaos of the square. “Let’s end this.”

Chapter 265 – The Steps

Ella

We dash across the square, my hand clasped in Cora's, adrenaline moving my legs for me even despite the fact that I don't have the strength for it. As we run, debris and smoke fly around us. The humans are pressing their advantage, shelling the center of the city with abandon after they heard the prince is dead. They know Sinclair must be regrouping, so they're doing as much destruction as they can while they can.

My eyes are on the temple steps ahead of me but for a moment – just a moment – my mind turns to my mate.

He is the one responsible for the prince's death I know it for a certainty, without having to ask. He wouldn't let anyone else take the final blow – it was vengeance and it was his. But the prince – that photo of him on the board room table – it had looked like it was in the palace. My eyes flick to the palace building to my right – does that mean is Sinclair in there?

We're close to the temple steps now, just feet from them, really. But I have to try.

I tug at that bond within me, the one tied to that deep place somewhere behind my ribcage.

Dominic? I call, my inner voice breathless with the hope of it. My wolf gives a few excited nips, anxious inside of me, wanting to be with him, to smell him –

I wait, heart pounding, as Cora and I reach the steps, our feet thumping to match my heart's frantic rate. Cora takes the steps two at a time, pulling me up behind her until we reach the clear and empty marble expanse at the entrance of the temple. The temple, miraculously, has been untouched by the human's fire. Perhaps the Goddess has had a hand in shielding it for us, just until we got here.

"Are you ready?" Cora asks, panting. "Do you know what to do?"

I turn my attention to her, nodding, but can't help myself from glancing back at the palace.

"What?" she demands, following my gaze. "What is it?"

"Sinclair," I breathe, studying the façade, trying to see him – desperate for a glance "Ella!" My sister shouts, taking me by the shoulders and giving a little shake. "Pay attention! We've got work to do, and hardly any time to do it!"

"I think he's in there," I confess, turning my eyes suddenly full of tears – back to my

sister. “ Cora, this could kill me if I have a chance to say goodbye –”

Her face screws up with rage and she shakes me harder. “No, Ella,” she yells, her voice desperate and angry at once. “No! You are the daughter of a damn Goddess, you will not die in the deliverance of her gift!”

I meet her eyes, then, and pause, shocked by her passion. But then I nod my head, fervently believing. I have to believe this, or else I won't have the strength to survive it. I place my hands on my stomach, reaching for the bond that I know still exists between me and my baby, but which has grown so weak in the past few days that I can barely sense it. I pour my strength down that bond, telling the baby how much I love him, how I can't wait to meet him, how we're going to live live live.

Cora, I think, senses what I'm doing and lets me have this moment alone with my child. But when I open my eyes, my gaze newly steeled and prepared for the challenge to come, she nods once and turns to face the square. I set my shoulders and stand next to her. I take her hand and close my eyes.

I work to slow my breathing, to get to that state I found in the desert under the moon when my mother gave me my instructions, told me how to deliver her gift. My heart rate falls to a peaceful resting rhythm, my vision starting to go violet behind my eyelids. I sink lower into myself, seeking the base of my being. My wolf curls up inside of me, finding peace as well.

But then, very suddenly, I feel that tug. The one behind my ribcage. The one tied to him.

Ella?

My eyes fly open as I gasp and I cry out. “Dominic!” I shout, my eyes frantically searching the square for him.

“What?” Cora pants, looking around, frantic. “What is it? Is he here?”

“He's here,” I breathe, my eyes still searching and failing to find him. “Ella,” she says, looking at me with sorrowful eyes. “There's no time people are dying “I know,” I reply, closing my eyes again and setting my jaw. “You're right, I know. I'll – I'll press on.”

It's a lie, though. I can't do this without a word to him Dominic! I shout in my mind, my wolf already on her feet, raising her nose to catch his scent. Where are you?

Here – he cries to me, and I can feel his anxiety, his love, his pleasure at hearing from me, his terror that I'm here in this horrible place, in the middle of the war. I'm in the palace – I'm working – where are you? I'll come find you now you've got to get inside –

NO, I reply, fervent. Please, Dominic, there's... there's something I have to do. Goddess stuff? He asks, and I can hear the humor in his tone, even beyond the fear. I can't help the little smirk that plays at the corner of my lip.

Yeah, I respond, Goddess stuff. Are you...are you safe? He asks. Are you okay? I'm... I'm weak, baby. But I have to do this. I was born to do this.

Ella, his voice is a warning now, and the wolf in me responds instantly, eager to follow his lead, to listen to him, to trust him. Stop whatever you're doing – it's not worth it, if you're weak – Please, I say simply, letting him feel the strength in me, the assurance, the need. Trust me, Dominic. I can do this. I'll come back to you. I'm strong. We're strong.

There's a pause before he replies. I can feel his worry, his dread. But also, that he believes in me.

All right, trouble, he responds, and I can almost see him folding his arms over his chest and smirking at me. Do what you've got to do. But the minute you're done, I'm in charge.

Yes, Sir Big Alpha, I respond, letting him feel the sass in my message. I feel his laugh rumble down my bond to me, let it wrap around me, strengthening me further. One last thing, and then you're in charge.

He lets me go, then, and I take a deep breath, settling myself on the cold marble of my mother's steps. I hadn't realized that I'd needed that moment with him, that it was the last piece of the puzzle before I could do this right. But I should have known. He is such an intrinsic part of me, of my journey of who I am. How could I do this without him? Together, we are complete.

I settle my hands on my stomach, keeping the lines to my bond between my mate and my child open, returning to that base state. My wolf settles down again with me, brushing her warm fur up against those bonds, against my soul It's time.

As my breath and my heartbeat again slow, as my vision turns lavender, I open up my third bond that new one, between my mother and I And I let her power fill me.

Chapter 266 – True Sister

Ella

The power comes slow, at first, and I feel like a dry terracotta pot into which the first drips of rain begin to fall. But then, as my body begins to take in the power, to soak it up like thirsty clay, the power starts to fall into me like a summer storm. It soaks every bit of me, splashing against my tired soul like a cooling salve.

But then, even when I feel I've had enough, it keeps coming, and coming. The storm of power in me grows until it becomes a monsoon, until it fills me, overflows me. Until it reaches my throat, threatening to fill my mouth, my nose, my lungs. I tilt my head back, desperate to keep above the tide, but it's ceaseless.

I gasp, struggling, but I can feel it trickling around the edges of my mouth, finding its way in despite my efforts –

If only I'd had more time – if only I were stronger – but I can't fight this – it's too much –

I spit, trying to keep the water out of my mouth, but it pours in and I gasp against it, coughing as the power fills my lungs.

“Ella!”

Only a sliver of me can hear Cora's shout – the rest of me is gone, consumed by the power, by the knowledge it gives me, by the way it fills me, possesses me, chokes me with its strength –

I can feel her hands on my shoulders, but then, suddenly – I'm gone –

My mind is filled entirely within the power now and I feel myself weakly working to swim through it, to get to the top, to come up for air. But my arms – they can't seem to push through, to lift me. I gasp again, desperate for air, and the power floods down my throat, filling me, consuming me, grasping every edge of my body until my vision goes not black, but totally white.

And then, what I see next...

It is as if I've always known it. Always been aware, deep down, of precisely who she is. But in this moment, in my greatest weakness, I've finally realized it. That she is the only one who can help.

Because there, in my weakest moment, my mother gives me a gift. A single image of her kneeling by a bedside in the orphanage, pressing a kiss to a little girl's forehead as she whispers the word “daughter” lightly against her skin.

But that little girl isn't me. It's Cora. Cora, my sister. The sister of my heart, my constant companion, but also. Yes, now I know it. Also the sister of my body. My true sister.

The Goddess in the memory turns towards me and gives me a small smile. "Two daughters," she says, soft. "One of wolf, one of human born. To unite the worlds. Two halves of a goddess to make one."

"Why?" I think the question more than ask it. I couldn't form the words if I tried, drowning as I am in her power. The Goddess shakes her head slowly, that small secret smile still on her lips.

"You had to love each other willingly, to want to save each other. Not because you had to, because it was some written destiny. It must be a gift, freely given."

She nods to me as I stare at her. "Go now," she says. "Your time is short."

At that, my eyes fly open in the real world then and I can see that I am spilling power, overflowing with light, but I'm laying flat on the steps of the temple, and I cannot breathe –

"Ella!" Cora cries, terror in her voice, tears streaking down her face. "Ella!"

I turn then, my body wrenching, hacking, and power spills from my mouth like water from my lungs. I draw a gaping breath, then, which feels like fire within me and for a moment I close my eyes, trying to fight against the pain in my body – the pain in my stomach –

I wrench my eyes open, then, and look down at myself, at my legs –

Blood – blood everywhere –

Oh my god. I rip my eyes back to Cora's face. "Cora," I demand. "Cora, take it."

"Ella!" I hear his voice as I plead with my sister, hear it somewhere across the square, but I can't look now –

She's got to take this from me – only she can – or it will kill me, and it will all be a waste –

"Cora!" I shout, almost screaming against the sound of explosions so close to us, gripping her hand as hard as I can. "TAKE IT, Cora! Take the gift, and give it!"

"Wha – what?" She mumbles, her voice frantic. "Ella – I can't –"

“You can,” I say, locking my eyes on hers, her hand gripped in mine like a vice. “You are my sister, Cora.” I stare into her gaze then, transmitting the truth through my eyes, through my hand on hers, through the bond that has always been there between us –

She gasps, suddenly, with the knowledge of it.

“Ella!” I hear him screaming now, can hear his feet pounding towards me.

“Now,” I growl, fierce. I know he will rip me from her – he won’t be able to help it, when he sees the blood – “Take it now, Cora!”

She nods quickly, understanding, afraid but...but willing. “All right, Ella,” she says, tightening her grasp on mine. And then, almost in a flash, I feel the power starting to pour out of my body and into hers.

Cora is strong, though. Stronger than me, stronger than I ever was. I may have been her protector in the orphanage, in our lives, but she has always been the source of my strength.

As the glow fades from me, I can see it filing her. And she welcomes it, makes space for it, relishes it within her. It drowned me – almost killed me – perhaps killed my child – But Cora? Cora has space in her heart for all of it. For the love, the joy, the knowledge.

I feel the last trickle of it leave me and have no strength left. My hand drops from hers, my head falling against the stone of the temple steps. My vision begins to fade as Cora stands, her eyes turned up towards the sky.

I hear my name again, not from her lips, but from another’s. From his.

Strong arms wrap around me, pulling me close against a chest. My name, over and over again, frantic with worry.

“Wait,” I say, as he turns me away from her. I am desperate to see, to look. “Watch,” I whisper, pointing a shaking finger at my sister as, suddenly, she lights up like a star. And as she does, as she gives the gift to the world, I feel myself simultaneously shudder and smile.

Good, I think. It is done. I close my eyes, then, allowing my head to fall against my mate’s chest as he holds me close. We’re moving, now, running – somewhere, I don’t know where. I don’t care. I have nothing left.

Inside of me, I can feel nothing, as if the efforts of the day severed all of the bonds inside of me. I can no longer feel Cora, or my mother. I can’t feel my child. I can’t even feel Sinclair, or my wolf. It’s just...nothing.

I am at the end of myself. I am spent. And I honestly...

...I don't know if I can come back.

Chapter 267 – My Mate, Covered in Blood

Sinclair

I roar as I stumble through the doors of the hospital, my bleeding mate clutched in my arms. Everyone in the emergency room freezes – doctors, nurses, patients. Everyone. The noise that comes from me is unending, a demand, a plea, a threat. I am halfway between states now – my eyes filled with the wolf's flame, my hands ending in razor-sharp claws.

She breathes against my chest, barely. Blood drips from her. The bond – I can barely feel it, between she and I –

And my child –

I take a breath, then, glaring around the room, and open my mouth to shout again. "DOCTOR," I cry. "Get me a doctor! NOW!"

The room collectively jumps at this, patients clearing away from the desk and heading towards the sides of the room, the nurses leaping to their feet. A doctor strides forward – one I don't recognize – but he's here, damn it, he'd better be good –

"Come," he commands, stopping a few feet from us and then gesturing backwards towards the door to the treatment rooms. He doesn't need to look any closer to know that she needs immediate care. "This way, fast."

I stride after him as he shouts out commands on his way. In my arms, Ella is deathly pale, passed out, hardly breathing. I glance down at her, at her beautiful face, her rose-gold hair falling across it. She's strong – I know she's strong –

But she's given so much. I grit my teeth, growling, livid with the universe for asking this much of her. I will not lose her to this.

A swarm of doctors gather around us as we move down the hall, the doctor who first met us at the entrance taking lead and giving commands left and right. They move quickly, efficiently, bringing forward machines and tools as we approach a bed at the back of the room.

"How many months?" The doctor asks, looking closely at Ella's face as I lay her down on the bed as gently as I can.

"Three," I say. I could tell him the exact number of days, but frankly I don't think it will help at this point.

"Halfway," he murmurs, and then glances up at me. "Too soon for an early cesarian. The

child...it would not survive..."

"This child will survive," I growl, grabbing the man by his coat and bringing his face close to mine. "And she as well. You will do everything – you will move mountains, if I command it –"

The doctor, to his credit, does not quail. "Sir!" he barks back at me, his eyes angry as he grabs my offending wrist.

I blink, surprised, and then release him. The doctor takes a step away from me and brushes off his coat, keeping his eyes on mine. "I will move mountains for her, sir," he bites out, his voice still low. "I will do everything I can to help her survive. We owe you that. But it will not be helped by you losing your temper. Is that clear?"

I feel my lips pull back from my teeth in a snarl as I close the distance between us. "You dare take that tone with me?" I ask, my voice low with warning. "I am your King – you will –"

He steps up to me, then, our chests almost meeting, glaring up into my eyes. "You may be our King, sir, but I am the Alpha in this surgery. And if you want me to save her life, you must back down."

I feel the growl rip from my throat then, but I turn my head to look at her. So small – so fragile, in that bed –

My pride is not worth her sacrifice. I glare at the doctor but step away. "Do your work," I snarl, folding my arms across my chest and stepping to the head of her bed. The doctor holds my gaze for a moment more and then does as I say, getting down to the business of saving my mate's life.

A moment later, the room is swarming again with people, with beeping machines and IV's and tanks of oxygen. They work quickly. Almost before I can comprehend it, Ella has a mask over her face to help her breathe, wires and tubes plugged into her arms. The nurses cut the clothes from her poor fragile body, strip her naked so that I can see the blood thickly coating her thighs. I almost flinch away at the sight, but I refuse myself that indulgence. If she can endure it, then I can surely stand to watch. So I stare, following their every move.

The professionals murmur to each other as they work, speaking in a medical language I can't comprehend. It's almost more than I can do to stand still, helpless. I have basic medic experience, of course, but I know that her life is in their hands, not mine.

And it kills me to realize that, to stand here and watch her fight knowing that there's nothing I can do. As I watch, a nurse comes forward with an ultrasound machine,

plugging it in as another quickly spreads clear jelly on Ella's stomach. Then, they turn towards a screen, murmuring as they try to look at my child, assess his state.

I cannot see a heartbeat on the screen. My stomach drops and I hear a moan. A moment later, I realize that the noise dropped from my own mouth.

"We need to take her in," The doctor commands, stripping off his bloody gloves and turning to me. "Her uterus is torn, leaking blood at the cervix, and her organs are in failure – she needs immediate surgery –"

"The child," I growl, focusing my eyes on him. "Is he alive?"

The doctor hesitates, glancing at her, and then quickly nods. "There's a heartbeat," he says, turning back to me. His voice is apologetic as he utters his next words. "It's not good, Sir. If it were anyone else, I'd...I'd instruct my team to let the child go, to concentrate on saving the mother."

I snarl at him, taking two instinctual steps forward. "You will save them both," I demand, my voice steel.

He doesn't flinch, but instead nods. "I will fight for her," he responds, solid. "I will fight for both of them, as my Queen and my Prince. Trust me, Sir." He bows his head then, briefly, before again meeting my eyes. "I will do everything."

I clenching my jaw against the desperate need to threaten him further – to tell him that if I lose either of them I will rip his head from his shoulders –

But. My breath shakes as I force myself to exhale, my whole body trembling against my need to do something – anything –

A single nod, that's all I give him. It's all I can manage before he returns the gesture and begins delivering more commands. They're on the move before I can react, wheeling her entire bed towards a door at the far end of the room – taking her away from me.

I stride after her, refusing to be parted.

"Sir!" a nurse demands, daring to put a hand on my arm to stop me. I snarl at her as well, unleashing the full strength of my fury as I bare down on her. She quails next to me, giving out a little shriek and covering her head. I start again after my mate.

"Sir, please!" the nurse shouts after me, her voice shaking. "You can't go into surgery – it's not safe!"

I ignore her, though, storming through the doors through which Ella just passed,

following her into the surgery. Two more nurses move towards me, protestations on their lips, but the doctor interrupts them.

“Let him in,” he calls to them, his attention not wavering from Ella. “He won’t be parted for her. It’s not worth the lost time trying to keep him out.”

The nurses hesitate but then give in, returning to her bedside. I move again to the head of her bed, accepting the surgical gown and gloves that someone hands to me.

“You will stay out of our way as we work,” the brave doctor informs me, briefly meeting my eye. “You can stay as long as you don’t interfere. I won’t lose her to your impatience.”

I consider it for a moment and then nod, agreeing to his terms. The doctor begins his work then, turning his attention to my mate and beginning to deliver his commands. Then, he raises a shining scalpel and begins to cut.

Chapter 268 – The Waiting Game

3rd Person

The hours pass slowly for Dominic Sinclair as he sits at his mate's side in the post-surgical suite, willing her to live.

Her hand is held tight within his and his eyes are trained on her face, watching her eyelashes flutter every minute or two. Her chest raises and lowers slowly, shallow breaths coming less frequently than they should. She had survived the night. But just barely.

Sinclair wipes a hand down his face, willing himself to stay awake. The surgery took hours and he had stood stoically at her side for every moment of it. It had been agony, watching them cut her to ribbons, listening to them mumble words he couldn't understand, trying to fix her like some kind of broken car

As if she wasn't the most important thing on earth. As if she wasn't the daughter of the Goddess, the future Queen, the mother of his child and – most important of all –

His fucking mate.

It had taken everything in him to stand there and not wrench the tools from the doctor's hand, to do something, anything, to fix her out of the sheer will of his desire for her to live.

But in the end, after hours of work, the doctor had just nodded to Sinclair, wiping a bloody hand across his forehead. "We've done everything we can," he had murmured, looking down at Ella. "It's in her hands now."

Then, they'd wheeled her into this room, hooked her up to what looked like a thousand ridiculous machines, and just left. Left Sinclair here, holding her hand, waiting to see if she lived or died. But damnit, he wasn't going to let her die. No fucking way.

Nurses come and go periodically, of course, checking on her, checking on him, letting him know that there have been no turns for the worse, asking if he wanted any food, any water, anything at all. He'd ignored them all, focused only on her. His Luna. The light of his world.

A few hours later, a knock comes at the door. Sinclair glances towards it, expecting another nurse, and blinks and surprise when he sees Cora and Roger standing there.

"Dominic," Roger, his face full of sorrow, his eyes not going to Ella and instead focusing on Sinclair. Roger opens his mouth to say something else, but Cora interrupts.

"Is she alright?" Cora breathes, hurrying to her sister's side, glancing between Ella and her mate.

"No," Sinclair murmurs, unwilling to lie to spare Cora's feelings. "She survived the surgery...but the doctor says it could go either way. And that it's it's not..."

Sinclair covers his face with his hand, unable to say it.

"The child?" Cora asks, desperate. "The baby?"

Sinclair just nods, letting Cora know that he's still there. He can't feel my son anymore, can't feel the bond, but he hopes that Ella can. He hopes that they're holding on to each other, in their unconscious state. He hopes...

God damnit, but he doesn't know what he hopes.

Cora refocuses her attention on Ella, running her hand over her sister's forehead, brushing some hair behind her ear. "Come on, kid," she murmurs. "You have to fight, Ella."

Sinclair doesn't say anything, letting Cora have the moment with her sister, but he takes the hand from his face when he feels Roger grip his shoulder. Sinclair looks up at his brother, shaking his head. Roger says nothing, looking at Ella's fragile form laying limply on the bed.

A long moment passes before Roger looks up at the television, which has been playing lightly in the corner for hours on end, the dialogue a bare murmur. "You have the television on?" Roger asks, frowning.

"The nurses did it," Sinclair responds, shrugging noncommittally. "I asked them to turn it off, but," he lifts a hand lightly before dropping it, not understanding. "They said something about... unconscious patients. The sound of human voices. It's better, apparently. Makes them feel grounded or something." Roger frowns at his brother, confused, but Sinclair just shakes his head. Whatever. It can't hurt."

Roger nods, but then looks back at the television. "Have you seen any of this?"

Sinclair blinks and then looks towards the television. The news is on, but he glares at his brother." No, Roger, I'm not sitting here watching the news while Ella slips away from me. I'm concentrating on her, obviously

"

"Would you just look, Dominic?" Roger throws back, frustrated. "I wouldn't draw your

attention away if it wasn't important. Obviously."

Sinclair growls a little, irritated, but he does as his brother asks and turns towards the television. To his surprise, it's an image of Cora. Sinclair blinks, paying more attention now to the words that scroll across the screen, to the picture of Cora glowing with a bright white light, her clasped hands raised above her head.

As he watches, Cora's body seems to brighten. He sees her mouth fall open in a gasp, her eyes press closed as a great flare of light erupts from her, turning the screen white as her brilliance overloads the capacity of whatever camera was trained on her. It's an unrefined image, probably something taken from a security camera, so no wonder.

But when the light fades, Cora stands panting, looking out onto the square. Sinclair squints, leaning closer, and he can see – yes, himself, in the corner of the screen, with Ella in his arms, dashing away towards the hospital.

"I was there," Sinclair murmurs, leaning back in his chair. "I don't need to see it again on the news."

"Yes," Roger replies, sliding his hands into his pockets, his eyes still on the screen. "But do you know what she did?"

Sinclair briefly shakes his head, slumping back in his chair raising one hand to his forehead, his other still wrapped around Ella's in the bed. It doesn't really matter to him what Cora did, not really. Because whatever it was, Ella had tried to do it first, and it may have killed her. He doesn't give a fuck what it was.

"Dominic," Roger growls, frustrated again. Sinclair snaps his eyes to him, his lips pulling back in a snarl. Roger puts up a hand, calling silently for peace. "I know that you're focusing on Ella, brother, but you're our King now. Or if you're not, you will be soon. And you need to know what the hell is going on in your nation."

"Fine," Sinclair grinds out, not taking his eyes from his mate. "Tell me, and be done with it."

"In that moment that flash – Cora gave the Goddess's gift. To everyone. Didn't you feel it?"

"No," Sinclair grumbles, frankly not interested. But, if he thinks back... he had been distracted, of course, frantic at the feeling of Ella's weak body in his arms. But he had felt... something. Hadn't he? Some kind of...of hope? Running through him?

–

“Well, I did,” Roger continues. “And so did everyone else in the nation, at that very moment. She spoke to us, Dominic. The Goddess did. Through Ella, through Cora. She made clear to us her love for all of us for humans, for wolves. Communicated to us that her love for us all is equal, and that she holds neither as superior. And that, in the name of her love,” Roger holds out a pleading hand here, begging Sinclair to see, “that we must stop fighting. That we must work together to love each other, to find peace.”

Sinclair says nothing, just staring at Ella, his fingers still pressed to his forehead.

“Don’t you get it, Dom?” Roger insists. “They ended the war. It’s over. A ceasefire, a real one. The humans have stopped attacking, and so have the wolves. There need to be talks, of course, negotiations, but —”

Sinclair snaps his head up, looking at his brother. “It’s over?” he asks, a little shocked. “For real?” Roger nods emphatically, raising his eyebrows. “For real, Dominic. It’s done. You’re going to be crowned King in a new era of peace.”

Sinclair leans back in his seat at this news, his eyes still on Ella. He lets out a deep breath, one perhaps he hadn’t known he was holding. Then, his eyes travel to Cora.

“Thank you,” he breathes. He means it, deep down, even if he can’t muster the power to express it properly. “We are...in your debt.”

Cora meets her eyes and just shrugs. “She did it,” she says, glancing down at her sister. “She did all of the work, paid all of the price. She just...handed it to me, and I took the final step. Ella is the great peacemaker here.”

Cora slowly shakes her head, taking her sister’s other hand. “I just hope she can fight as hard for herself as she did for everyone else,” she murmurs. “She needs to come back so that we can thank her. Not me.”

Sinclair growls his agreement and stares at his mate. God damnit. Why wouldn’t she wake up?

Chapter 269 – All Just a Dream

All Just a Dream

Sinclair

The doctor knocks gently at the door then. I slide my eyes to him, annoyed to have another person in the room. Is this best for her, all of these interruptions?

“How is she,” the doctor asks, coming to Ella’s side. Cora moves to stand at Ella’s head, making room for him.

“The same,” I murmur, returning my eyes to my mate’s pallid face. “No changes.”

“What does that mean, doctor?” Cora asks, wringing her hands.

“Well,” the doctor replies, leaning down to study Ella’s face. “I can’t say that I’m encouraged by it. I think that if she were getting better, she would have woken by now.” He moves away from her and over to some of the machines, lifting the tape they’ve been printing for hours to read the report. But,” he murmurs, studying them. “It doesn’t seem like she’s getting any worse.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Cora asks, looking at him with pleading eyes. She, like me, wants to do something, anything.

“Go home,” the doctor says frankly. “Get some rest. There’s nothing you can do for her here. So go home, prepare yourselves.”

“Prepare ourselves?!” Cora gasps, her eyes going wide. “For –”

“For whatever’s next,” the doctor interrupts, meeting her eyes evenly. “It’s not going to do any good to panic. If she survives, she’s going to need you, all of you.” He glances around at the rest of us as he says this. “She’s going to need you to be strong for her, so it doesn’t do any good to stand around her worrying. I would recommend that you go home and let us care for her here.”

Cora nods anxiously, but I can’t help the anger that builds in me.

“I am going nowhere,” I snap, my eyes fixed on the doctor, who comes back to the bedside now.

“I understand,” he replies, meeting my gaze. “But you two,” he says to Cora and Roger, “I don’t recommend that you stay.”

“All right,” Cora murmurs, steeling herself and nodding. Then, she looks to me. “But we’ll

be back- tomorrow. And if anything..."

"We'll keep you informed," the doctor replies brusquely, heading out of the room without another look at me. "Leave your number at the nurse's desk."

"Abrupt, that one," Roger says, frowning a little as looks at the empty door through which the doctor just passed. "I kind of like him," I mumble begrudgingly. "He's no coward."

Roger just shrugs as Cora moves to his side. "Sinclair," she says, her voice serious. "How long have you been awake?"

I just glare at her. What a stupid question. "Seriously, Sinclair," she insists. "The doctor is right – we're not doing Ella any favors exhausting

ourselves. When she wakes up, she's going to need you at full strength."

I just shake my head. "I'm not...I can't rest. Not when she could..."

I can't finish the sentence. Can't even think the thought. Cora nods, seeming to understand. But then she starts, suddenly blinking rapidly.

"Wait, Sinclair," she rushes. "Ella told me, once, about how you...you meet? In her dreams?" I snap my head, looking towards her. "Can you..." she waves a hand towards Ella's still form. "Can you do that? Can you meet here there? Maybe...give her some hope? Some encouragement?"

I shake my head slowly, grinding my teeth. Why the hell hadn't I thought of that? But still...

"No," I growl. "Not without her invitation. She has to bring me into the dream, and I don't know..." I lean forward to look at her. "I don't even know if she's dreaming, let alone in a state to offer me..."

I feel a sudden flutter of hope within me. Could it be possible though?

"Sinclair," Cora begs. "Please, try. It can't hurt."

I consider it for a moment and then, slowly, I begin to nod. "All right," I agree, against my better judgement. If I fall into a sleep...and she's not dreaming, or I don't...god damnit, the waste of time. I would never forgive myself if she...if she slipped away while I...

"Go," I command, not looking at them. "I do this alone."

I hear them murmur something to each other and then slip from the room, closing the

door behind them. I take a long moment, then, to look at my mate. To lean forward, pressing a kiss to her precious forehead.

"I'm coming to meet you, trouble," I murmur to her. "Please, let me in."

Ella

Spin Spin Spin, I think, giggling to myself as I spin around in my little dream forest. It's so good to be back here – where the air is cool, and damp, and I have the trees above me and the roots below.

I'm spinning in circles, like I used to love to do as a little girl, laughing as I go. "Spin, spin," I sing, biting my lip for the joy of it.

How long have I been spinning like this, though? My wolf yips, jumping just beyond my vision. But when I turn towards her, she's gone. Silly pup, where is she of to? I hear her again, and spin towards her, seeing a flash of her rose-gold fur. But then, again, gone.

I stop myself, frowning, looking for her, and am hit with a sudden wave of nausea.

"Oof," I say, falling to the ground, my hands going to my stomach. "Ohhh, too much spinning." I giggle again, laughing at myself. Silly girl, making myself sick. I throw myself back on the grass then, enjoying the feeling of it against my skin, waiting for the nausea to pass.

It doesn't though. It worsens, making my head pound with it.

"Ohhh," I moan, lifting my hands to my head. Silly girl, silly dream. Suddenly my head spins of its own avail and I close my eyes against it, not wanting to see the trees twisting above me while I lay still.

I wish, suddenly, for my mate. For his arms around me. For his chest pressed against my back, his delicious scent overwhelming my senses. That, I know, could fix me, wipe away this horrible feeling. After all, he makes my head spin in precisely the opposite direction. He might even me out.

And then, quite suddenly, he's there. I know it the moment he arrives and I smile, propping myself up in the grass on my elbows, looking for him.

"Hello, gorgeous," I murmur when I finally see him at the edge of the woods. I'm soaking in the gorgeous look of him, all tall rippling muscles and dark power. But...something is off. His image... flickers, a bit like my wolf was doing. One moment he's there, the next he's gone, only to come back again shimmering like he's in a haze.

“You stay put,” I command, frowning at him and pointing a finger in his direction. “I’m trying,” he says, laughing a little, his voice calm. “Concentrate, baby. Bring me in.”

So I do. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, letting myself want him here. And when I open my eyes, there he is. He’s closer this time, standing only a few feet from me. And yes – when I sniff the air, I can smell every minute detail of him on the breeze. I allow myself to close my eyes, relishing that scent.

His warm chuckle brings me back to him, though. “Well, trouble,” he murmurs, smiling softly down at me. “We’ve been waiting for you to wake up. What have you been doing instead?”

“Spinning,” I say, laughing and throwing my arms back above my head. And then- bloop! I’m gone. Somewhere else the clouds, perhaps totally alone, spinning again. Spin spin spin, I think, turning around in the soft nothing of the white fluffy clouds.

Was I just talking to someone? I can’t remember.

Spin spin spin, I think, giggling. Somewhere, in the distance, I hear my wolf howl. I pause, but then ignore it. What is a wolf anyway? Here, there are no wolves, only clouds...maybe I, too, am a cloud...

Chapter 270 – Ella’s Dream

Ella’s Dream

Sinclair

I throw out my hand, grasping for her arm – her skirt – anything – as she disappears from my sight in a blink. A growl grows in my chest. God damnit, why can’t she just stay still? I put my hands in my pockets and look around at the familiar dream forest, this place we’ve come so many times. But there’s something just slightly... off about it. A haze, an... indistinctness to the details. As if Ella can’t put the pieces together quite well enough.

I’m still here, though, which means some part of her wants me to be. I hold on to this knowledge, desperately, and begin to prowl through the forest. Where the hell is she?

I hear her giggling somewhere and spin my head, looking everywhere for my mate. But then – god damn it, is it coming from above me? I stop, looking up at the canopy of leaves and the clouds, listening hard. Yes there is she in the sky? I cup my hands to my mouth and shout her name upwards.

“Ella!” I cry. “Ella! Come back here!” There’s no response, just more of that giggling. My inner wolf prowls within me, hungry, worried, ready for the chase. But now is not the time to be playing hide and seek. I let my anger and my alpha demand infuse my voice, trying again. “Ella!” I command. I hear the giggling cease. “Get your ass down here! Now!”

And then, suddenly, she’s there again, standing in front of me. I keep my face stern, not letting any of the relief I feel slip through. “Bossy,” she quips, crossing her arms over her chest and pouting. “Big bully wolf.”

“Ella,” I sigh, shaking my head and closing the distance between us, putting my hands on each of her cheeks. Her tiny face is so small, so fragile between my palms. And so, so incredibly precious. I let my eyes rove over her, savoring every detail. “Baby,” I murmur. “Come back to me.”

“But I’m right here,” she giggles, wrinkling her nose at me, confused but not dismayed. Her form flickers like a lamp with a bad bulb – now bright, now hazy, struggling to keep alight.

“Please, baby,” I beg, moving my arms to take her by the shoulders, to bring her closer to me. Please try.”

“Sinclair,” she whines. “I don’t understand.”

I shake my head, panicking a little. Ella’s innocence is one of the things I love about her,

but talking to her now...it's like she's a little child, like she really doesn't understand, doesn't remember what happened to her. And frankly, I don't know what to do – I hadn't thought through the possibility of meeting my mate in her dreams, but finding only part of her, an indistinct facsimile at best.

I feel Ella relax in my arms, though, as I press her close to me, nuzzling her face against my chest. My wrack my mind, trying to figure out what to do to bring her back.

But I come up with nothing – nothing logical, nothing real. And so I fall back on the thing that has always brought us together, without fail. I tip her face up to mine and kiss her.

My mate responds instantly, giving me a little gasp and taking a step closer to me. But our kiss quickly intensifies. Suddenly, she's pulling my face down to her, kissing me with abandon. Another moment passes and she's gasping, as if my kiss is air to her, bringing her life. Her hands sink in my hair, her nails rake against my scalp as she brings me closer, urges me on with her need. My body responds instantly despite my mind's protest that I need to do something – that I should be talking to her – convincing her – Shut up I think to myself. Because right now, she is the only thing that matters, and this seems to be what she needs.

I feel my knees start to weaken and I let them, falling to them, bringing Ella down with me, on top of me, her legs straddling my lap as I go to my knees on the forest floor. She moans, grinding her hips against me, pressing herself closer so that my head bends back on my neck. She takes control of our kiss, sliding her tongue into my mouth and pressing it against mine, desperate, hungry.

And I let her. I let her take charge of the moment, of me, of everything. Let her have me, all of me. And as she does, I realize, suddenly, that her flickering has stopped. That in my arms she's substantial...real.

My eyes fly open and I draw a deep breath, pulling my face away from hers – needing to see, but desperately scared that if we stop – if I interrupt this, that she'll fade away –

But no. I freeze, my arms wrapped tight around her body, pressing her to me, staring up at her shocked face which is vivid and warm and real. "Dominic," she whispers, her eyes suddenly filled with a clarity and knowledge and horror that tells me, without doubt, that she's back.

"Oh my god, Ella," I cry, my voice muffled as I bury my face against her, fighting the tears that spring to my eyes, that have been pressing there for hours.

"Dominic, Dominic," she whispers, her voice increasingly frantic, her hands loosening their grip in my hair and scrabbling to turn my face up to hers. I can't help the two tears that slide down my cheeks as I look up at her. "What's happening," she asks, her voice

still no more than a whisper. Where –” she looks around, increasingly frantic, “where are we –”

“We’re dreaming,” I reply, working to keep my voice steady, my arms still tight around her. “You’re in the hospital, Ella

“What?” She gasps, her eyes wide and terrified. “The hospital? What happened the baby?” I see her eyes fill with the utter panic only a mother can feel.

“It’s okay –” I hurriedly whisper, shaking my head, desperate to calm her. “He’s still – he’s still there.” I can see that my words only bring her anxiety down a notch, though.

“We have to get out of here –” she hisses in her panic, staring around at the dream forest I know she loves so much. “We have to help

“Shhh, shhh,” I say, working hard to calm my own heartbeat, to pass that calm on to her. “It’s all right, sweetheart,” I say, my voice level, soft. “The world is steady, for the moment. We have time. You can relax.”

Her gaze snaps back to me, her hands pressed against my cheeks. “It’s it’s done? The war? The peace? The gift?”

I nod slowly, begging her with my eyes to rest. “Please, Ella,” I whisper. “Don’t worry about any of that right now. All you need to do is heal. We need you to focus on getting better.”

“Getting better,” she murmurs, shaking her head at me, though I feel her body relax a little on top of me, her muscles loosening, her panic slowly leaving her. “But what’s wrong with me?”

I wait a moment before I reply, holding her gaze, letting her muscles unwind a little more into this solid dream frame that I remember. I’m worried, terribly worried, that when I tell her...that she’ll flit off again. And worse, push me out of the dream.

“Please, Dominic,” she begs, her eyes making it clear that she needs to know. “Please. What’s wrong?”

“You gave the Goddess’ gift to the earth, Ella. You changed the world.” I shake my head a little, still marveling at my incredible mate. “But it was too much for your body. You had to undergo surgery – you’ve been asleep for days.” I see her eyes go wide again with shock and fear, but she presses her lips into a tight line, letting me continue. “And the baby...”

I close my eyes, hardly able to mutter it. But her voice is hard, strong, carrying me

through my weakness. "The baby?" she demands.

"He's alive, Ella, but I...I can't feel him. I'm worried the connection is gone, and that..."

She drops a hand from her face, swiftly pressing it to her stomach. I wait a moment, desperate to know, but when she doesn't speak...

...I know the answer before she says it. "Dominic," she whispers. "I can't feel him either. I haven't felt him since that night in the desert."

My dear readers, Thank you for stopping by and reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it.

Chapter 271 – A Cry in the Forest

Ella

My breath starts to come short and fast now as I press my hand desperately to my stomach, seeking that connection somewhere within me. But I feel like I'm grasping through empty air, my fingers searching for any touch, any tie, and coming up empty.

"Ella," Sinclair murmurs, tightening his hands against my back. "Calm down – the doctors say that it's okay, that he's still with us –"

"Still with us," I growl, my teeth clenched as I try to manifest that damn connection, to make it appear even when it stubbornly refuses to present itself. "How can he still be with us if I can't feel him?"

Sinclair shushes me softly again, a soft rushing sound that despite my desperation – makes me open my eyes and look at him. My fear comes rushing in then, wiping out my anger and frustration. "Dominic, what does it mean?" I ask, my voice trembling. "If the doctor's say they have a heartbeat – but we can't feel him?"

"I don't know, Ella," he responds, his own voice low with worry and despair. "But we're going to figure it out, okay? Together?" He pulls his brows together, worried, and nods to me, begging me to see. "Please, just calm down. We'll think it through."

I nod quickly, bobbing my head in agreement and forcing my body to relax. Sinclair moves beneath me, folding his legs instead of kneeling, pulling me into his lap and cradling me against his chest. I rest my head against him, making myself breathe slow, deep breaths, letting the warm scent of him root me in my body.

God, how long have I been gone? I have...memories. Memories of being here, of dancing, of being in the clouds and in the trees...of flickering in and out of this place. I push my mind back further and remember, quite suddenly, the last place I was

On the steps, with Cora, handing her the gift...watching her use it...

I cringe at the memory, of the feeling of drowning in my mother's power, of all of it draining from me as I handed it to Cora, taking my life with it. I look up into Dominic's face then and find him there, ready, likewise peacefully breathing. Waiting.

"Cora?" I ask quietly. He nods to me, smiling a little. "She's totally fine. The world is fine. But...don't worry about that, now, my darling. Just worry about you."

"And Rafe," I murmur, tucking my head back against him and closing my eyes. I turn my attention to my little boy, then, and my heart breaks. God, I want him so badly – have wanted him so badly for years and years. And in these past few months of happiness

with Sinclair, I have let myself imagine a beautiful future. I imagine him covered in pasta sauce the first time he tries spaghetti, imagine his first steps, imagine him playing baseball with his friends...

God, but now... the idea of losing him, of losing that beautiful future – it's so horrible I can hardly stand it. I feel myself physically cringing at the idea, curling further into Sinclair's arms as he tightens his hold around me, letting me feel the pain but also letting me know that he's here to help me bear it.

How horrible, the idea that it could all be just a dream...

My eyes snap open at that. I suddenly sit up straighter in Sinclair's arms. "What?" he asks, curious, a little frightened that something might be wrong.

"A dream," I murmur, my mind wheeling as I look around at our surroundings. "We're in a dream." "Well, yeah," Sinclair says, as if it's obvious. But he doesn't get it yet.

"And here," I continue, ignoring his interruption, "we can make anything happen that we want. Yes?" Sinclair studies my face and doesn't say anything, letting me continue. "And you're here," I insist, starting to get excited now, "because I invited you. Because I wanted you here."

"Yes?" Sinclair confirms slowly, still not getting where I'm going with this.

"So?" I say, smiling now, excited. "What if we invite the baby here too? Make him real so we can hold him, tell him how much we want him? You brought me back right now you kissed me – can't we do it with him?" I lose track of my train of thought a little at the end there – but I don't care, I'm too excited now. This is going to work –

I start to push myself from Sinclair's lap, ready to get to my feet, to head into the forest, to find my son, but Sinclair quickly pulls me back. "Ella," he hesitates, "I don't know if it will work –"

"What?" I ask, spinning to look at him and frowning. "Why not?"

He just shrugs and blinks at me. "I've just – I've never heard of it happening before. I'm able to come into your dreams because I'm your mate – I've never heard of a mother sharing her dream with her pup, even while pregnant I scoff at him, rolling my eyes a little. "Well just because you haven't heard of it doesn't make it impossible –"

He laughs at me for a moment then and I stop, smiling a little back at him. This, I think, this is what we're fighting for. For the bond between us, for the push and pull, for the fact that we're sitting in a dream, in the midst of a tragedy, that I'm probably dying and somehow I'm still rolling my eyes at him and making him laugh.

Sinclair nods at me, his eyes fixed on mine, and I know that he completely understands. That he gets it too. That this thing between us? It's worth trying anything so that we can share it with our child.

"All right," he says, pressing a quick kiss to my mouth. "Lead the way, trouble. You're in charge now."

I nod, affirming this, and push myself out of his lap and to my feet, dusting off my skirts and looking around the forest. He rises next to me, the mass of him as steady and assuring in this dream state as it is in real life. I brush my hair behind my ear and look around, wondering where to begin.

"Um," I hesitate, looking up at him. "When I was gone up in the clouds – what did you do? To get me to come back?"

"I called for you," he replies, smirking down at me. "And, characteristically, you ignored me. Until I hollered at you to come back."

I scrunch my face up in distaste at this. "Well I'm not going to yell at my child, the first time I meet him," I murmur, turning away from him and scanning into the woods. "But the calling....it's not a bad place to start."

Then, feeling a little foolish, but believing in it anyway, I raise my hands to my mouth and cup them on either side. "Rafe!" I call, my voice echoing louder into the dream than I thought it would. " Rafe, where are you baby! Mama wants to see you!"

We both wait for a second, holding our breath, but nothing. The forest even consents to go quiet, as if letting us hear more clearly. But still, not a sound. "You try," I murmur, nudging Sinclair with my elbow. "You're louder than me."

"I'm louder than everyone," he replies, raising his hands to his own mouth, and then he, too, shouts into the forest. "Rafe! Come on, son!" I listen to the sound reverberating in the trees and hold my breath, hoping so hard...

Still, nothing. "Keep going," I whisper to Sinclair, glancing up at him and then closing my eyes. Sinclair complies, calling out sweetly to our boy, telling him that we're looking for him, that we want him, that we can't wait to meet him. And as he does, I will him to be real, I demand the dream to make space for him, I cry out for him with every piece of And just when I feel like I can't bear it any more, I feel..

Just the tiniest tug. And a baby's cry sounds out in the forest my heart.

Chapter 272 – The Baby in the Forest

Ella

Sinclair and I both gasp at the same moment, and my eyes fly open, finding his. We are both frozen in place, but then another cry sounds and we are instantly in motion, bolting through the forest, searching for our son.

“Rafe!” I cry, my voice desperate as Sinclair pulls ahead of me on his long legs. “Rafe, baby! We’re coming!”

Rafe’s cries are louder now, more solid, the sound of a real baby crying real tears. And then suddenly something catches my vision out of the corner of my eye and I skid to a stop, turning left while Sinclair continues ahead. And suddenly, I see –

A bassinet, of all things, sitting alone in the middle of the forest. And in it, I know, is my baby. “Dominic!” I call, wanting him back, wanting him at my side, but I don’t wait. Instead, I hurry to the side of the white basket, gripping the edge of it in my hands as I pull myself closer to it, desperately looking inside – And then.

There he is. My baby boy, my pup, my child—looking exactly as I knew he would be – not how I imagined he would look, but how I knew he would be.

I am breathless, wordless, as I reach for my child, who mews quietly with discontent in his little bed, swaddled in a clean white blanket. Slowly, softly, I lift him into my arms, just staring at him as I hear heavy footsteps pounding behind me.

“Ella—” I hear Sinclair start, but then, as I turn, he forgets the rest of the word. He stutters to a stop, his mouth falling open as he takes in the sight of us – both of us – mother and child. But I barely spare him a glance, returning my gaze to my infant son.

“Hey, baby,” I murmur, my throat choked with my joy and my tears. “Hey, baby Rafe. We’ve been looking for you.” Slowly, I begin to rock and bounce him, soothing him, letting him feel me holding him against me, letting him know that I’m here, and I’m so sorry, and how I love him with the entirety of my being.

I hear Sinclair take a few steps closer and I tilt the still—crying baby towards him, letting my mate have a look at his son. I look up into Sinclair’s face as I hear him choke. I’m a little shocked – but honestly, not surprised – when I see tears streaking down his face.

“Hey, kid,” he starts, his voice wavering, his hand shaking a little as he reaches out his giant mitt to touch him. But before he can lay a finger on him, I see Sinclair hesitate, pulling his hand back.

“What,” I ask, laughing a little. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s just so tiny,” Sinclair marvels, shaking his head and staring down at our little boy’s perfect porcelain skin, his little mop of black hair. “If I touch him, I’ll crush him...”

My laughter shakes the baby a little, causing him to fuss and hiccough as I shake my head at Sinclair. “He’s your son, Dominic. You won’t hurt him. You won’t let yourself.” So, still hesitant, Dominic reaches out just the tip of his finger and brushes it against Rafe’s perfect little cheek.

“Hey, Rafe,” he murmurs, and I can hear his heart in this throat. “We’re so excited for you. We’ve got big plans.”

I smile down at my baby for a moment, unable to tear my eyes from him, but then I look up at Sinclair and fall in love with him all over again, seeing the hope and the joy and the wholeness in his eyes as he takes in his first sight of his son.

“Here,” I offer, holding the baby out towards him. “Do you want to hold him?” Sinclair looks at me with startled eyes and shakes his head. “Ella – he’s so small –”

I laugh a little at this but just pull the baby back to my breast, secretly pleased at the refusal. I never want to put this little baby down, I want to hold him just like this forever. Instead, Sinclair takes a step closer to me and wraps his arms around both of us, encircling us with his warmth and his protection and his love. And in this moment I just feel so....complete. So blessed to be able to share this with my mate and my son.

Rafe begins to quiet now, taking deeper breaths, blinking up at us sleepily with his grey little infant eyes that I know will someday turn green like his father’s.

“You’re going to grow up to be so big and strong,” I whisper to my pup, rocking him close against my body. “And we can’t wait to watch you do it.”

“We need you to be strong, buddy,” Sinclair whispers, his voice catching. “Just hold on. Your mama’s going to carry you, and keep you safe.”

“We’re so sorry,” I whisper, feeling tears come to my own eyes now at the thought of all the things my poor baby had to endure. No wonder he had been hiding, had shrunk away from me and the horrors of this world. “It will be different now – it will be safe, and good – you’re my only job now. We love you so much.”

“Hold on, baby,” Sinclair murmurs, reaching out a finger to stroke Rafe’s little hand, which has just popped out from its swaddling. “Just...hold on.” And as we watch, Rafe’s little hand uncurls and wraps around his father’s giant finger, coming nowhere close to encircling it but... trying nonetheless.

I feel the tears streak down my face as I look between them, the two men who are the world to me. But even as I watch, I feel the dream state start to shift. Start to fade, to pull away.

"I think we're out of time," I say to Sinclair, holding my baby tight against me, unwilling to let go.

He nods, realizing it too, realizing as well that there's no reason to fight it. All dreams come to an end, even perfect ones like this. Hurriedly, he turns my face to his, pressing a kiss to my mouth. I savor it, the perfect contours of his lips which fit so perfectly to mine. He pulls away too soon.

"Come back to me," he demands, his eyes serious, almost glaring into mine. "You come back to me, Ella. Wake up. As soon as you can."

I nod, assuring him. "I will," I promise. "I'm coming back to you. We both are."

Sinclair opens his mouth to say something else, but before he can, the dream fades to nothing. And then there's only mist. Sinclair

I sit stark straight the moment I gasp back to consciousness, the memories of the dream ringing through my mind, and spin to Ella, looking desperately for that sweet smile, the flash of her eyes –

But...

I blink, uncomprehending for a moment as I realize that she hasn't woken up alongside me. That she's just laying still, breathing those same shallow breaths, her pulse a slow tick on the monitors beside her.

"Good, you're up." I almost leap out of my skin as I hear the doctor's voice. I spin towards him, my instincts instantly ready to attack – but I stop myself just in time.

"Sorry, sorry," he says, putting up an apologetic hand. "I...I shouldn't have startled you like that. I apologize."

I take a moment to settle myself, to bring my pulse down to a semi-normal level, before turning to look at Ella again. "Is she alright?" I ask. "I met her in the dream – I was expecting her to..."

"Is that what you were doing?" The doctor asks, raising his eyebrow. "Interesting." He looks towards the monitors. "She did display some increased brain activity for a bit there...which isn't a bad thing..."

The hesitation on his face, though, tells me it isn't precisely a good thing either. "The baby?" I demand, my voice low with frustration and disappointment. Damn it, I had truly thought that would work...

"The same," the doctor informs me, indicating a smaller monitor that's tracking the fetal heart rate. I put my head in my hands, wondering what the hell else I can do now...

I feel a hand on my shoulder and flinch, but I don't bother to shove it off. The doctor is doing his best, after all working to save them, to bring them back to me.

"Her body is too weak," the doctor says softly. "Even if you did contact her in the dream, even if she wants to come back, her body may not let her. Not yet. It's...it's in the hands of the goddess now." I despair for a moment but then...

I realize something. And raise my head. It is in the hands of the Goddess – and the Goddess has a gift to give. And I know who currently holds that gift...

"Call her," I growl, glaring up at the doctor.

"Who?" he asks, removing his hand from my shoulder and flinching away.

"Cora," I respond, "Ella's sister. Get her here now."

Chapter 273 – Cora’s Gift

3(rd) Person

Cora almost skids to a stop as she flies into Ella’s hospital room. “What,” she gasps. “What is it – is she –”

But Sinclair is just standing at the side of Ella’s bed, his hands pressed deep into his pockets, staring at the door as if he was waiting for her. Cora bites her words back, knowing that if Ella had ...well, Sinclair wouldn’t just be standing still. He’d be tearing the world to pieces.

Cora lets out a deep breath, her eyes trailing down to her sister in the bed. God, she looks so frail just laying there, wired up to all of those machines. Her passionate sister, so full of life, looks like a little bird crumpled up in that bed...

“She’s fine,” Sinclair snaps, bringing Cora’s eyes back to him. Roger comes into the room then as well and Sinclair’s eyes flick to him, a little surprised. After all, he hadn’t called for Roger, he’d called for Cora. Apparently, they’d been together.

Sinclair didn’t let himself think about why. He didn’t care. His attention returns to Cora alone. “Give it back to her,” Sinclair demands, his voice even and controlled. “What?” Cora asks, standing up straight. “Give what back? I didn’t take anything -”

“What’s going on, Dominic?” Roger asks, stepping in front of Cora, realizing that his brother is worked up about something. “Tell us. We need to understand.”

Frustrated at not being immediately obeyed, Sinclair takes a deep breath and steels himself, trying to will patience into his body, even though he’s run completely out of it. He just wants this done. Wants her back.

“I met her,” Sinclair snaps, working to summarize the past few hours as quickly as possible. “In the dream state. She was there with...with Rafe.” Cora’s face lights up with this news and she opens her mouth to ask a thousand questions, but Sinclair keeps going. “Ella is strong in her spirit, but the doctor says her body is too weak. That she would need a gift from the Goddess to heal her now.” His eyes move to Cora’s, angry. “Which you took from her.”

Cora’s mouth drops open at his accusation and a hand flies to her breast. “Sinclair,” she breathes, “I would never – she gave it to me – I had to.

“I don’t care,” he interrupts, his voice raising now. “You took it, and now you have to give it back.” He takes a step towards her now, as if he’d rip it from her body if it would save his mate.

“Easy,” Roger warns, taking a step closer to his brother. “Easy, Dominic. We hear you. You have a point, okay? Just...just let Cora think.”

The brothers turn to Cora then, pinning her under their dual stare. Her breath comes faster as she quickly sorts through her thoughts. Is this her fault? Did she do this to Ella, by taking the gift? Was she the reason her sister would die?

“Cora,” Roger says carefully. “What do you think?”

“Um,” she mutters, her eyes unfocused as she stares at the ground, trying to piece it together. “I don’t know? I didn’t mean...I didn’t mean to? But he might be right? When I took the gift from her, that’s when she collapsed...”

“Well,” Roger says, working hard to keep the energy in the room calm, feeling like he’s walking in a minefield that could explode at any minute. “Can you give it back?”

“May maybe?” Cora replies, lifting her eyes and looking between the brothers. “But will that be good for her? She couldn’t she couldn’t hold it all, when she was weak...”

Sinclair begins to growl then and Cora shrinks away, overwhelmed.

“Enough,” Roger snaps, glaring at his brother and gesturing towards Cora. “Can’t you see that she’s trying? That none of this is her fault? She’s trying to help – let her help, if she can.” Sinclair visibly fights his instincts to force Cora to do his bidding, to save his mate. But Roger is right – terrifying the girl isn’t helping, so he forces himself to take two steps back, to return to his spot by Ella’s head.

Cora relaxes a little as Sinclair backs off. She looks between the brothers, hesitating. “Are you sure you want me to try this? Even if it could...hurt her?”

Roger glances over his shoulder at the open door. “Do you want me to get the doctor and ask?”

“No,” Sinclair bites out. “He’s done all he can. He’s out of this now. This is between us. Between... the two of you.” It kills him to say it, to admit – however tacitly that there’s nothing he himself can do anymore. That this is now between the sisters, and the best he can do is watch. “Do it.”

Cora still hesitates and is surprised when Rafe comes to her side and takes her hand. “We have to try,” he murmurs. When she looks up at him, she’s further shocked to see that his eyes are filled with hope. “I think he’s right, Cora. It makes sense. And it’s a gift – I don’t think it can hurt her.” Cora’s lip begins to tremble then as she thinks about it – the horrible, awful consequences that this could have if it went wrong. But Roger holds her gaze, tightening his grip on her hand, giving her the strength she needs, the courage.

“All right,” Cora whispers, nodding once and moving swiftly to the side of Ella’s bed, taking her sister’s hand. “Um,” she says, looking around. “Can I have a chair?”

Roger quickly moves to bring her one from across the room, helping her settle into it. As he moves away, Cora tucks her legs up beneath her so that she’s seated cross-legged, as she was that night in the desert with Ella and Reina. Sinclair makes no move, standing stoically by his mate, watching everything.

Cora gives them both a tremulous smile and then, taking a deep breath, she closes her eyes. She had watched everything that Ella did that night in the desert. Had watched her sister fall deeper into a state of truth, had watched her make that connection with her mother, had watched her be filled with the Goddess’s gift and start to glow with it. Cora hadn’t wanted to admit it then, but she’d felt...well, a little jealous. It was the jealousy of an orphan for a friend who found her mother, the jealousy of a girl who was starting to feel like a tag-along while her best friend found her mate, and her true identity, and her calling. A whole beautiful life while Cora had...

Well, not nothing. But not that. So, she had been jealous – happy for Ella but wanting a little piece of that for herself as well. And she had been ashamed of those emotions in that moment, of her envy, and had felt herself...undeserving of her spot on that sacred trip to the desert to commune with the Goddess. But now, after learning the truth?

–

Cora knew that all of that the envy, the feelings of inadequacy – it had all been in her head. The Goddess was her mother as well, after all. And she, Cora, a human, had been the one to give the gift to the world. There was no reason to think that Ella could do anything that she could not. Well, except turn into a wolf.

But Cora pushes that thought to the side along with the rest of her doubts. Instead, she embraces her identity and sinks – as she had seen Ella do – into that deeper state. And as she does that – as the light behind her eyes fades from orange to green to a deep and rich lavender and the sounds of the room’s medical devices fades to the background – Cora finds a peace within herself. And...there.

There, right at the center, where she imagines her heart to be, Cora finds it. The gift, shining, waiting, not exhausted but endless and ready to be given at will. Cora moves forward towards it, wrapping her hands around it, feeling it pulse with warmth. As she lifts it in her hands, she imagines that she can almost hear her mother speaking to her, singing, encouraging her to give it.

So she does. Cora opens her eyes in the real world and is not at all surprised to see the gift glowing in her hands – a real thing, a true entity, lighting the room with its warmth.

Cora smiles at it and then glances at Roger, pursing her lips against her laughter to see him staring at her in shock, his mouth hanging open.

—

But when her eyes move to Sinclair, she sees that he has not moved at all. That he just stares at her, demand in every line of him. She nods to him, agreeing. It is time.

So Cora simply stands and takes two steps closer to her sister. She reaches out her hands, presenting the gift, leaning over to hold it close over Ella's own heart.

"I love you, sister," Cora whispers. "It's time for you to take it back." And there is not a doubt in her mind as she opens her hands and gently places the gift directly in the center of Ella's chest.

Chapter 274 – Bonded

Ella

My head feels...so heavy. I groan, trying to move my hands up so I can press them against my temples, but I can't move them. "Easy," I hear him say beside me and instinctually I turn towards his voice. Where –

"Easy, Ella," he murmurs, his words thick with emotion. "It's all right..."

I peel my eyelids apart, then, confused at the effort. It's like I haven't opened my eyes for weeks...

My vision comes back to me slowly, the room around me coming into focus with effort. I blink rapidly, looking around at Sinclair, and Cora, and Roger all standing around me, peering at me with worried faces. I feel very suddenly like Dorothy, when she wakes up from her trip to Oz.

"What?" I murmur, my voice thick and my throat scratchy. Suddenly anxious, I try to sit up, pushing at the bed beneath me but – What the hell were all these wires, tied to my arms?

"Easy, trouble," Sinclair whispers, pressing his hand to my shoulder, keeping me down. My body responds to his command, relaxing backwards as I look up at him. But...

"Where am I?" I ask, staring at him, and then I press my eyes closed. It's all just too much. "You're in the hospital," I hear my sister explain. "After the gift, at the temple..."

But her voice fades, almost as if I can't hear it. I feel my heart start to pound, my breath ratchet up as my memories start to come back to me. Of being on the temple steps of Cora there, and what we learned about each other of Sinclair's warm arms around me –

And then, nothing – and then clouds – and Sinclair again, and my baby –

Oh my god, where was my baby? "Rafe?" I gasp, spinning towards Sinclair as my eyes fly open, desperate. "Where is Rafe?" Then I start to look all around me, searching for him – he's here, he has to be, I remember him, my little baby, wrapped in white swaddling, holding him in my arms

"A dream," Sinclair says hurriedly, "it was a dream, Ella – we met him in the dream –"

He puts his hand on the swell of my stomach then, drawing my attention to it, reminding me that he's here – of course he's here, I haven't given birth yet –

"Oh," I breathe, moving my own hands so that they rest on either side of my baby. Then I

close my eyes, resting my head back on the pillow, and search for him. And it's hard, it's distant, but...

There. Yes, there. I can feel him, my ties to him. My bond with my baby. I reach out to him, sending all the love I have in my heart down our bond, and feeling a little pulse back. He hears me. He tells me he knows. He's holding on.

"Oh," I say again, feeling my whole body relax. I open my eyes again, feeling a rush of sudden and unexpected joy. I look up to Sinclair and nod. "Okay. Yes. He's here."

Sinclair exhales a huge rush of air, grasping one of my hands and lowering his head so that our foreheads touch. We stay like that for a long minute as tears start to slide down my cheeks, unbidden but unstoppable. It's all just...it's a lot to take in in just a few minutes. To come flying back to reality after such a hard few weeks, after days of struggling in the dream state to get here. It is hard on me, on my mind.

But, there's no where else I'd want to be. "I'll get the doctor," I hear Roger murmur, and then his footsteps move to the door, heading out the room.

"Cora," I call, opening my eyes and reaching my other hand for her. Sinclair straightens at my side, letting us have our moment as I take her hand. "Are you all right?"

"Am I all right," she huffs, laughing through the tears that are falling down her own cheeks. "Are you?"

I smile at her, unable to help myself, and then glance down at my poor beat up little body. "Um, I think so?" I feel so weak but there is also...a warmth, a stillness in me that feels... I frown, looking up at her. "Did you...do something to me?"

"Um," she says, laughing a little and running her hand through her hair. "Yeah? I gave you back mom's the Goddess's – the gift, I gave it back to you," she stumbles, not really knowing how to explain it.

I gasp then, working to sit up straighter in my bed. "Cora!" I scold. "Why?! I gave it to you – it's yours "Ella," she chides, "you're being ridiculous – you were dying – of course I gave it back to you I didn't even want it

"You didn't want it?!" I almost shout, frantic and frankly a little mad now. "It's a gift from a Goddess – from our mom – I worked so hard to get it here, the least you could do is take it.

"Enough," Sinclair growls next to me, and my eyes snap to him as I feel suddenly guilty and a little childish, arguing with my sister like this in front of him, especially when I'm clearly so sick. I look up at him, my eyes apologetic, and I see his face instantly soften.

“Please, Ella,” he begs.” You’re so weak – and she saved you with it – it can’t possibly matter –”

“Okay,” I whisper, nodding up at him and then turning to Cora. “Okay,” I repeat, raising a finger to point at her. “But as soon as I’m better, you’re taking it back.”

“Okay,” she laughs, agreeing to these terms, wiping the tears off of her cheeks. “Whatever you say, sis.”

—

I’m still smiling at my sister, holding my mate’s hand tight in my own, when the Doctor comes in, Rafe hot on his heels. It’s a man I haven’t seen before certainly not one of my normal doctors – but he certainly seems to know me.

“Ella,” he says quickly, coming to my side, almost running into Cora in his hurry to get to me. He quickly scans my face, his expression worried. “I have to say, I’m shocked to see you awake –” He quickly grasps my wrist, feeling for a pulse and turning towards the monitors behind them, scanning them for new information. “It shouldn’t be possible...” he mutters, his brows drawn together. “Earlier today...”

“It was...” I say, hesitating, looking up at Sinclair. “Not precisely a medical intervention.”

He turns then, looking towards us confused, and I just shrug. Sinclair stands stoically beside me, still holding my hand. “An intervention from the Goddess, if you will,” he observes, a little humor in his voice. The doctor’s face screws up further with confusion but then he simply exhales quickly and shakes his head, dismissing it, moving on.

“Okay,” he says, turning back to the monitors. “Whatever it was it is a...remarkable recovery.”

“Is the baby all right?” I ask quickly, working to sit up further and wincing as a sharp pain spikes through my back. Sinclair starts at my grimace, leaning closer to me, scenting me, clearly working to figure out what’s wrong and how he can help.

“The baby is...” the doctor says, looking at a small monitor tucked in amongst the larger ones. “He’s fine,” he mumbles, almost to himself. “Better, if anything, than he was the last time I was in here.” “Good,” I say, almost under my breath, pleased to have my suspicions confirmed. My baby and I... we are going to make it. “Can I go home?” I ask quickly, hoping to heap more good news on top of the pile.

“Certainly not,” the doctor scolds, turning towards me and frowning. “You’re still incredibly weak. You have days yet in this hospital – tests, monitoring...”

I look up at Sinclair then, my eyes pleading. I know that if I ask him, if I want it enough, he'll pick me up and carry me bodily out of this hospital right now. But he slowly shakes his head too, letting me know he agrees with the doctor. "I want you home as well, baby," he murmurs, "both of you. But he's been good," Sinclair says, glancing at the doctor. "We go when he says we can, and not a moment sooner."

I raise my eyes at this, a little shocked to hear Sinclair passing the power of decision making to someone else. I turn to look at the doctor again, assessing him anew. He really must be good.

"Your mate is right," the doctor murmurs, writing something on my chart, almost ignoring me to concentrate on his work. "I'm the best. And I'm not letting you go until you're ready." He glances at me then, raising an eyebrow, waiting for me to agree.

Overruled, I huff a little laugh and raise my hands. "All right," I agree. "If both of you say so, then I'm sticking around. For as long as it takes. But um," I hesitate, looking up at Sinclair. "In the meantime?"

He frowns down at me, suddenly worried. "What?" he asks hurriedly, "What is it? What do you need?"

"Is there any possibility..." I grimace, a little embarrassed, still looking at him as I twine my fingers awkwardly together. "Of some chocolate cake?"

Sinclair freezes and then bursts into laughter, raising a hand to his forehead. "Seriously?" He asks. "You come back from the brink of death, and the first thing you want is chocolate cake?"

"And ice cream?" I beg, giving him my best smile.

"She should eat, if she can," the doctor says, smiling a little as he glances at me.

"We'll go get it," Roger says, his voice light as he reaches a hand for Cora, who joins him at the door. "We'll go down to the cafeteria we'll be back in a second."

They go, and the doctor follows after them, pausing at the door. "I'm going to order a series of tests, Ella. You rest, but know that your day is not over yet. All right?"

I nod happily at him as he closes the door and then look up at Sinclair, sighing contentedly. "Chocolate cake?" he teases, smirking down at me, a bright and happy light in his eyes. "Really?"

"It's for the babyyyy," I whine jokingly, laughing and putting my arms up towards him, wanting him close. Sinclair seats himself on the bed next to me, putting one leg up so

that he can lean back and rest his head on the pillow next to mine. The poor bed groans under the additional weight of his huge werewolf frame.

We sit there quietly for a moment, a little happy smile playing on my mouth as I stare at him, letting the very sight of him help me to ignore the aches pulling on my muscles and my joints.

“You gave us a scare for a minute there, trouble,” he whispers, raising a broad hand to softly stroke my face. I narrow my eyes a little. “Come on, Sinclair,” I quip, teasing. “Did you expect anything less from me?”

“From you?” he smirks, raising an eyebrow. “Never.”

And then he kisses me, tucking his hand gently behind my neck to pull my face the few inches closer he needs to press his mouth to mine. And in that moment I feel my future life open to me, warm, and bright, and sweet. After all, we have a baby on the way. And I can't wait to meet him.

Chapter 275 – Home, Finally

Ella

“All right,” the doctor says, sweeping into the room where Sinclair and I are resting together on my hospital bed, my head on my mate’s shoulder as we watch some daytime soap opera. I perk up at the doctor’s entrance, eager to hear what he has to say. Sinclair gives a little groan as he sits up and puts his feet on the ground, standing next to the bed to hear the news. I know that he’s not

tired – instead, I think it’s the opposite. All of these days and hours cooped up here in this little room have made him terribly restless. I reach out and take Sinclair’s hand, thanking him, silently, for all he’s done for me.

“Well?” Sinclair asks, tucking his other hand to his pocket. He looks levelly at the doctor, who has given me perhaps a hundred tests since I woke up a few days ago. Everything from blood work, CT scans, ultrasounds. I’ve been poked and measured and observed so much I feel like a science experiment.

The doctor pauses before me, flipping through the pages on his clipboard, double- and triple- checking everything. I smile as I watch him do it. For all his cold bedside manner, he really has shown himself to be diligent and dedicated.

“You’ll be happy” the doctor says, letting the pages drop and tucking the clipboard away under his arm. “Everything has come back stable.” He looks seriously at me then before he continues. You’re well enough to go home, Ella, but I want to emphasize to you that you are by no means a healthy woman at this point in time. And your pregnancy is still extremely high risk. I want you’ at home. In bed. Relaxing, until this baby is born. Is that clear?”

I nod eagerly, my heart beating faster with joy. Home. Home. God, I can’t wait to be home...

“Good,” he says, nodding and shifting his gaze now to Sinclair. “Your home was it damaged during.” “No,” Sinclair says, a statement that also gives me a little thrill of joy, despite the fact that I know it already. Sinclair has been receiving steady reports from Roger and others on his team which have set our new post-war world in a very different light. “By some miracle, my personal residence went relatively untouched during the attacks on the city. The neighborhood is largely abandoned but,” he shrugs as he looks down at me. “We don’t need company.”

I squeeze his hand, smiling up at him. We talked about potentially moving into the palace to confirm to the people that Sinclair does intend to take the throne, but we decided against it until after the baby is born. And even then, I imagine I’ll delay as long as we can. I like Sinclair’s house – I have lots of good memories there. It would take a lot

to persuade me to move away from it.

“No,” the doctor considers, pursing his lips. “No, I don’t imagine you do need company, newly mated as you are.” He takes a deep breath then and levels a glare between us. “I know that it’s awkward, but I want to be very clear about this – when I say that Ella needs to be relaxing...it’s very important that the activities that promote that relaxation are entirely nons*xual.”

I blink in surprise at the blunt statement and feel Sinclair go still beside me. I try not to show my disappointment – honestly, if there’s one good thing about bedrest, it’s the fact that you’re in bed the whole time. And putting aside the fact that there’s not much else to do in bed, Sinclair and I...

well, we’ve never been very good at keeping our hands off each other, have we?

“It’s very important that you practice restraint,” the doctor warns, his brows drawn down. “You’ve had surgery on your uterus, Evelyn – it’s very delicate. Even,” he sighs, putting a hand to his forehead and pausing, figuring out how to word this I smile to see how awkward he feels delivering the news “Any disturbance to your uterine or vaginal tissues Just.” He sighs and drops his hand, shaking his head. “Just don’t do it Okay?”

I nod, smiling warmly to let him know that I understand. “Baby comes first, doc,” I say. Sinclair says nothing, but nods his agreement.

“Great,” the doctor says, giving us a little half smile and heading for the door. “In that case, best of luck! Check in with your OBGYN and regular doctor for continued care. I’ve sent them my notes.” He starts to head out into the hall and Sinclair surprises me by striding after him. I cock my head, curious. What on earth is he doing?

“Doctor.” Sinclair’s voice is quiet, almost muffled with the distance, and I lean forward to hear better. “How much do you get paid here?” The doctor scoffs and tells Sinclair that, quite frankly, it’s none of his business.

“It is now,” Sinclair replies. “Because whatever it is, I’ll pay you double to be Ella’s personal physician for the remainder of her pregnancy. And our children’s physician, beyond.”

When I hear the sound of hands slapping together in a handshake, I smile and lean back against my pillows, pleased at this development. With this doctor and Cora on my side, I feel quite confident about my chances in this pregnancy. That is, if Sinclair and I can keep our hands off each other for the next three months...

A few hours later, Sinclair carries me over the threshold of our home, my arms wrapped around his neck. I grin up at him, pleased at the gesture. “Is this a tradition in werewolf

mating ceremonies? The carrying of the bride over the threshold?"

"Totally human, I'm afraid," Sinclair replies, twisting his mouth in chagrin. "If this were a traditional wolf homecoming, I'd be chasing you down in the moonlight, nipping at your heels.... He snaps his teeth at me, making me laugh.

"Well let's be human then, for today," I say, putting a hand over my stomach as he takes a few steps inside and kicks the door shut behind him. "Safer for the baby."

Sinclair heads right for the steps, carrying me upwards towards the bedroom. "How's he doing in there," he asks quietly, glancing down at me. "Angry at being jostled around?"

"He's good," I say, sending a little question down the bond to my pup and receiving a little ping of happiness and contentment back. "He just says he's angry to be missing our soaps. Wants to know what's going on with Tatianna locked in that cell in Leonardo's basement."

Sinclair chuckles, carrying me easily down the hallway, as if I'm no more than a feather duvet in his arms. "Tell him we'll get a TV brought in the room, with all the channels. He'll have weeks and weeks to catch up." He carries me through the open door to our room and I smile to see that he's had someone arrange the pillows and blankets just as I like them.

"Nest!" I cry, throwing out a hand dramatically towards the bed. "How I've missed you, nest! My one and only love!" Sinclair grins as he settles me down amongst the blankets. "Be careful," he warns "Or I'll be jealous "

"Of darling nest?" I gasp, burying my face in the pillows and clutching the blankets close to me. Then, I peek up at him. "Actually, maybe you should be. I'm going to be doing a lot more snuggling with the nest for the next few weeks than I am with you."

Sinclair glares at the mess of blankets playfully, pretending a jealous rage he doesn't feel. "Watch out, nest," he murmurs. "She's mine. And I can take you."

I pull the blankets close to my chest, laughing and playing along. "How dare you threaten the nest! Brute!" I raise a hand to playfully smack him but he catches my wrist, pulling it to his mouth and laying a gentle kiss there.

"You keep your nest," he murmurs, making my stomach tingle. "Whatever makes you happy." I smile at him and relax my head against a pillow.

"Thank you," I murmur, turning my wrist in his hand so I can grasp his palm. I smile at him with all the love in my heart plain on my face. "For being good to me. For pulling me through all of this."

“Only a little further to go,” he says, leaning forward to plant a chaste kiss on my forehead. “But when this is all over?” He pauses and I look up into his face, curious. He gives me a stone–cold, serious look. “I’m going to f*ck you for a week straight.”

I can’t help the laugh that bursts from my lips, quickly silenced by the press of his own against my mouth.

Chapter 276 – Ella Gets Hungry

Sinclair

I wake, a few hours later, jumping up straight the moment I realize that Elle n't next to me.

She had drifted off to sleep hours ago after a simple dinner and a movie marathon. While she dozed next to me, I'd spent most of the late hours of the night answered the stack of emails piling up in my inbox and watching her sleep from the corner of my eye. But now, when my eyes peeked open for just a moment after maybe two hours of sleep?

Gone

I hurl the sheets off of me, getting to my feet in a flash, my head whipping around as I search the empty room for her with all of my senses. But my eyes tell me that she's not here, and my nose. Her scent is dull, but not stale She hasn't been gone long

A growl starts in my chest as I stalk from the room, looking through the empty hallways for my mate, desperate to find her. She was on bed rest, damn it – where the hell else would she be except bed? Unless Unless, something had happened – but she'd have woken me –

Or she'd been kidnapped – but there's no way I'd have slept through that.

I follow her scent quickly, my anger intensifying as I realize that it leads me down stairs. God damn it, the doctor expressly forbid her from stairs. I pound down the staircase hurrying through the hall and slamming open the kitchen door –

But then, she's suddenly there. Seated alone at the kitchen table in the dark, surrounded by a pile of food, her eyes wide.

"Um," she says innocently, knowing she's been caught and lowering the piece of cold fried chicken back down to its plate. "Do you want some?"

"Ella," I growl, storming to her side, relief washing through me like a wave. "What are you doing down here?" She looks up at me with her eyes still wide and then gestures at all the food as if it's obvious.

My snarl deepens and I don't let her off the hook. "The doctor told you to stay in bed – "I didn't go far!"

"He told you not to go down stairs." She holds up a corrective finger at me. "He told me not to go up stairs. And I slid down on my butt to be extra careful! It was totally fine!"

I groan, throwing my head back and pressing my eyes shut. “Ella,” I whisper between my clenched teeth. “You can’t be taking these risks-”

“I was hungry!” she protests. I snap my gaze back to her, glaring. “I could have gotten you food! Anything you wanted! I would have –”

Her eyes go soft then, filled with apology. “You would have gotten up,” she scolds, her voice worried. “When you’d just fallen asleep, Dominic She shakes her gently at me. “You can’t be at my beck and call like this- not for something simple like a trip to the kitchen for some food.”

“And how,” I ask, my anger fading but still not erased, “would you have gotten back upstairs? After your...” “I stare around at the rather shocking amount of food gathered on the kitchen table, “feast?” “You have like six couches, Dominic,” she replies, smiling innocently up at me like a little kid who knows they can get out of trouble if they’re cute enough. Damn it, but it works. Just a little. “I’d have napped on one of those until morning, when you got up, and could lift me in your big strong arms and take me back upstairs.”

“Oh, so you had it all planned out?” I murmur, relenting and raising a hand to play with the ends of her lovely rose-gold hair. I’m starting to calm now, realizing that my panic, while not precisely misplaced, hadn’t come to the dark ends I was imagining.

“Yup!” she quips, giving me a big smile and reaching for an Oreo, popping it in her mouth.

I can’t help laughing at this and pull a chair out for myself, sitting next to her. She hasn’t won – not yet but...well, I can’t really resist the sight of my pregnant mate happy, healthy, and hungry. But hungry for....

“What are you even eating,” I blurt out, frowning at her selection. It’s absolutely all over the place – fried chicken, pasta salad, cakes, wasabi-dipped peanuts, even a bowl of peas...

“Everything,” she murmurs, grabbing and pulling open a pack of licorice. “That’s also why I couldn’t wake you to bring me food. I didn’t know what I wanted. Turns out, I wanted it all.” I grimace as she takes a bite of the licorice, ripping it off with her teeth as she turns a curious gaze to me. “Any chance we could move the nest down here? It’d be terribly convenient, with all of these cravings

I cut her off with a laugh, shaking my head. “No, Ella,” I insist. “You can’t move into the pantry like a mouse. We’ll just make sure you have a better selection upstairs. Maybe we can hire someone...” I drift off into my thoughts, trying to think through solutions as she continues to pick through the contents of the table, grazing happily on whatever her

body tells her is next.

My mind doesn't come up with much though. I'm too tired for real ideas. I sigh, running a hand down my face and rubbing my eyes with my thumb and my forefinger, thinking longingly of my pillow and our bed.

Ella gives a soft little "oh," putting her hand on my shoulder. I open my eyes and look at her worried face. "See?" she insists, shaking her head and studying my tired face. "I was right – you needed the sleep – you shouldn't be up, Dominic – you're not on the pregnancy clock like me. You should be asleep."

"Don't be ridiculous," I murmur, fighting a yawn. "I'm up whenever you need me –"

"And don't you see how that's a problem?" she pushes, shaking her head at me. "Dominic, your dedication to me means everything, you keep me so safe, but," she pauses, biting her lip, perhaps choosing her words carefully. "You have more than me on your plate now – more than you ever have You – you'll be crowned King soon. You have to be able to turn half your attention to that, and let me care for myself in the meantime."

"Ella," I begin, shaking my head.

"No," she interrupts, reaching out a hand to touch my cheek. "Let me finish, baby I see you -I see what you've been doing. You spend a whole day with me, making sure my every need is met, entertaining me, keeping me company. And when I fall asleep? You spend a whole day playing catch up with the rest of your life. I mean, half of your staff is on night hours now, aren't they? All for me." She shakes her head slowly, begging me to see her side "It's too much, Dominic "

"No." I growl stubbornly. I'm not angry, I'm just frustrated because I know she's right. "It's not too much – you mean everything, Ella –"

"I know," she assures me. "But Dominic. I'm on the mend. I'm getting better. And you've got to stop treating me like a porcelain doll – I'm strong." She flicks her hair back confidently then, affecting an arrogance I know she doesn't feel. "I am, after all, Goddess born," she jokes, her mouth pulling up at the corner.

I laugh with her but still shake my head. "Ella, if anything were to happen to you..."

"It's not going to," she states brightly, utterly confident. "Trust me, Sinclair. I'm good. Let me take care of me, and our baby, and let me tell you when I need help." Her smile broadens. "Like right now!" She raises her arms out to me. "When I need you to carry me back upstairs to bed. Because I'm finished with this." She waves a dismissive hand at the mess all over the table. She grimaces briefly, pressing that hand lightly on her stomach. "I think Rafe is telling me that the licorice was a step too far."

I chuckle, standing and gathering my mate into my arms. Before we go, though, while I've got her captive against me, I lower my face to hers for a quick kiss. "All right, trouble," I tease. "But you promise me, okay? That you'll ask for help when you need it. No pride, no putting me or the nation first."

"I promise," she says seriously, unable to help her little smile. "If it's between the national economy and me getting a bubble bath, I come first. I have no problem with that."

And so, smiling, I carry my love back up to bed.

Chapter 277 – Back to Work

Ella

When I open my eyes, Sinclair is already gone, despite the fact that he got maybe five hours of total sleep last night. He was gone as soon as his head hit the pillow when we got back to bed. I had taken a moment to nibble on a little madeleine cookie that I'd snuck into the pocket of my robe, but I hadn't been far behind him.

I stretch leisurely on the bed now, enjoying the ability to extend my legs and arms all the way across it with no gigantic wolf-man to block my path. Of course, I'd rather have him here than not, but we must accept life's small luxuries when we are granted them.

I take a minute to check in on the baby – still asleep, wrapped in contentment – and then glance around the room, wondering how I want to spend my day. I'm hit with a little pang of despair, though, as I realize that... this is going to be how every day starts for the next three months. And that my options are honestly limited to television, and reading, and whatever I can find on my phone. (4)

I sigh, scolding myself a little for hesitating at a luxury that I'm sure a thousand people would jump at. And it's not that I would prefer, at all, the sturm and drang of the past couple of months – trying to seize the country back from a mad prince, trying to end a war, worrying if Sinclair was dead, worried if I would die...

No, this was better but...damn it. I have to admit that the boredom is going to be a problem for me. I've always been one to spring out of bed, to leap for whatever the day has in store. Even when I was a little girl, I was always up before Cora –

I feel myself perk up at the thought of her. Yes, Cora! I grab my phone, hastily pushing the buttons and giving her a call. "Cora?" I burst out as soon as she answers the phone.

"Ella!" she shouts, making me laugh. I hope she hasn't just scared the hell out of one of her patients, screaming in the middle of the office. She's been busy, I know, seeing a lot of pregnant women whose healthcare was interrupted by the war. "How are you – is everything okay?"

"I'm fine," I laugh, cheered by the sound of her voice. I lean back against the pillows, getting cozy. Do you want to come over? Hang out?"

"Um ya," she replies, as if it's obvious. "But I can't today, I have a double shift here. But tomorrow, maybe? You don't have plans to hang out with Sinclair then, do you?"

"No," I sigh, and she laughs at my disappointment. "I'm sending him off to, you know, run his kingdom." She laughs again and I can't help the smile that spreads over my face. There's nothing quite like making your sister laugh.

“He must be with Roger, then,” she wonders. “He’s been calling Sinclair for days, begging him to pay attention to some stuff, complaining that the world’s teetering on the brink of collapse without him.” I can almost hear her roll her eyes. “As if that’s anything new.”

“I know,” I murmur, biting my lip and feeling guilty. “That’s all my fault – he’s been paying way too much attention to me –”

“No, Ella,” Cora interrupts, stern. “You come first –”

“Well so does the nation, Cora,” I push back. But then, I perk up. “So you have to come over and babysit me, so he can go save the world or whatever. And tell me all about what’s going on with you and Roger. Don’t think I didn’t notice that you two showed up at my hospital room conveniently at the same time, one too many times.”

Cora hesitates on the other line and I sit up straight. “Wait,” I add, worried. “What’s going on?” “Nothing,” she hesitates. “I just...since you’ve been home, he’s been so busy and I’ve been...”

“You’ve been what,” I beg, a little breathless, worried now.

“Well, I’ve been...spending more time with Hank.”

“Who the hell is Hank?!”

“He’s your doctor, Ella,” she states as if it’s obvious. I grimace, realizing that I really never thought to ask and just called him “doctor” in my head. “You know, the one who took care of you for a week, brought you back from the brink of death? Who your mate hired to care for you, in conjunction with me, your OBGYN?”

“Oh,” I say as I fall back against my pillows, my eyes going wide. “Wait, so you’re not seeing Roger anymore?”

“I was never seeing Roger in the first place, Ella,” she lies, sounding rushed and embarrassed. Then, I hear someone calling her from wherever she is. “I’ve got to go – I’ll fill you in later. Bye, love you! Bye!”

I stare at the screen of my phone in my hand as it fades to black. Cora wasn’t into Roger any more? And she was was dating my doctor? And his name was Hank?

Sinclair

Roger places another pile of paperwork on my desk and I glare at it, resenting it because

it represents another few hours away from Ella's side. It's not that I don't want to do this work – I lead this nation, stitch it back together after that sham of a war tore it apart. It's just...

"I know," Roger grunts, giving me a little glare. "You're distracted. But you have to do this, Dominic! It's bad timing to take over a nation when you're mate's halfway through a difficult pregnancy, but –"

"Enough," I bite out, sighing and slumping down in my chair. "Let's just get on with it." He nods and brings the papers forward, explaining their contents to me.

I'm grateful for him, really. In the time that Ella was hospitalized, Roger really stepped up and took control of leading this nation, securing my position when it had been vulnerable. He had negotiated the cease-fire with the human forces, organized the Alphas and assured them of the forthcoming peace, and, perhaps most importantly, had ended any ambitious grabs for the temporarily vacant throne.

Honestly, I couldn't have done it without him. My brother really stepped up for me, and I know that within the next few weeks I'll have to find a way to show my gratitude properly. But right now, all of this paperwork is killing me. Especially when my whole world is actually in the other room right now, eating Swedish fish between bites of wheat toast.

"You need to meet with them, Dominic," Roger insists, bringing my attention back to the matter at hand while crossing his arms over his chest. "With the mayor, and the rest of the heads of the human state. They want a face-to-face, and they're not out of line to demand it."

"Fine," I agree, nodding firmly. "Can they come here, to the house?"

Roger scoffs and sighs, giving me a frustrated look. "Dom, not everything can be done here – you have a palace, built for this kind of meeting –"

"I'm not leaving her –"

"And the risks?" he pushes, drawing his eyebrows together. "You're letting people who consider themselves enemies to all werewolf kind into this house, cease fire or not. Do you want them to have that kind of access to Ella and your child?"

I growl at the very thought of it and Rafe nods, the issue decided. "I'll set it all up," he vows, "and I'll make sure you're briefed –"

"How are you doing all of this?" I interrupt, suddenly curious. "You've done the work of three men in the past few weeks – how are you doing it all? Who is helping you?"

Roger blinks at me, confused by the sudden change in conversation. “What? I have help – secretaries, our allies from the summit. Why does it matter?”

“Is it Cora?” I demand, anger starting to rise in me. “Because her only concern should be Ella – she’s volunteering at that human clinic in her spare time, I know, but if you’ve got her doing this as well –”

“It’s not Cora,” he snaps, looking away from me and down at his papers. I pause suddenly, surprised at the pain on his face. “Roger,” I demand, drawing his eyes back to me. “Are you two...”

“Just leave it, Dominic,” he snaps, using a tone he rarely takes with me. Then he deliberately looks back at the papers, though I can tell he’s not really reading them. Just staring as he gets himself together.

I watch him for a moment but then I let it go. After all, his romantic life is his own business and he and Cora...well, they’d never made any promises, had they? Still. I admit that my curiosity is peaked. I make a mental note to ask Ella later what’s going on between these two. If anyone can get to the bottom of this, she can.

Chapter 278 – Just Like Old Times

Sinclair

“Hey baby!” I say cheerfully to Sinclair as he appears in the doorway to our room late that night, leaning against the frame and smiling tiredly at me. “Do you want some pizza?” I hold up the greasy square box perched on the edge of my nest. “There’s only half a slice left but…” I shrug, “it’s really good.”

“No, Ella,” he replies, laughing and coming into the room, sitting on the edge of the bed. “That’s your cold, hours–old pizza. You keep that for you.”

“Right answer,” I murmur, snapping the box closed, pleased. I was saving that half–slice for my inevitable midnight craving, when I knew I’d be starving for it. “Is it normal?” I ask suddenly, turning my head to Sinclair. “To be this hungry in a werewolf pregnancy?”

He nods, smiling at me and laying down to bring his face closer to my stomach, placing a warm hand on it and saying hello to our pup through the bond. “Yes, it’s normal,” he says, looking back up at me. “There’s a notable uptick in feeding habits in a wolf pregnancy. Baby is hungry and mostly formed, all he has to do now is grow. He needs lots of food for that.”

“Good,” I murmur, running my hands through Sinclair’s hair as he gently strokes my stomach, murmuring little nothings to our pup. “I didn’t just want to be a pig.” As soon as I say the word, though, I have a sudden, striking desire for bacon. My stomach grumbles with longing, making Sinclair laugh.

He looks fondly up at me. “Can I get you anything, oh hungry one?”

I laugh and swat at him. “No,” I say, nodding towards my food reserves on the bedside table. “I’m set for a while. Besides, I just want you.” I scootch myself down so that I’m flat on the bed, moving down so that Sinclair’s face is even with mine, instead of my belly. “I missed you all day,” I pout.

“Did you,” he murmurs, wrapping one of his huge hands around the small of my back to pull me close against him. He angles his head down, nuzzling my mating mark and giving it a gentle lick. I feel a little thrill climb up my spine.

“Yes,” I murmur, running my hands through his dark hair again. “Even though I know you were off being important and powerful,” I sigh dramatically, “It was a great sacrifice for me.”

He laughs and brings his face up closer to mine. “Well, I’m so sorry to have put my angel mate through such an ordeal,” he teases, brushing his lips with mine. “I’ll have to think up some way to make it up to you.”

I freeze at this, at the look and intention I see in his eyes. “Dominic,” I warn, pushing him away a little. “You know we can’t –”

He laughs, pulling me closer. “I know, little mate,” he murmurs, “but just because I’m hungry for you doesn’t mean I can’t control myself. And it doesn’t mean we can’t be close.”

“Oh,” I say, relaxing again in his arms. I feel a little guilty for doubting him – I know, of course, that my safety comes first in his mind, above all other things. “Close?” I ask, curious what he means.

“Yes,” he whispers, leaning away from me for a moment and tugging on the hem of my pajama shirt. “Sit up, Ella,” he orders. “Take this off.”

“Dominic!” I laugh, doing as he says and helping him to pull my shirt up over my head so that I’m sitting only in my pajama pants and a bra. I wonder what the hell he has in mind. “What are you doing? Just because you’re confident in your ability to restrain yourself doesn’t mean I am.”

He pulls his own shirt off, grinning at me. “Don’t worry, trouble,” he says, shaking his head. “I’ll keep you in line. Besides, this is all innocence.” –

“Huh?” I wrinkle my nose in confusion. “Dominic, what on earth is going on?”

He’s standing now, unbuckling his pants and pushing them to the floor, but leaving his boxer-briefs on as he sits back on the bed and gathers me back in his arms. “I’m going to scent mark you,” he mutters against my neck, pulling me close again.

“What!?” I gasp, pushing him away a little. “We haven’t done that for months – and I’m your mate now, don’t I already smell like you?”

“No,” he hums with pleasure, pulling me back against him eagerly, like I’m something he can’t stand to be separated from for more than a moment. “You smell like corn chips.”

“What!” I shriek, horrified and laughing at the same time. “I smell like corn chips?” “Why are you surprised,” he chuckles, glancing at the two empty bags on the nightstand. “You’ve been hoovering them all day –”

“Oh my god,” I moan, covering my face in embarrassment and going limp on his arms. He laughs, letting me fall flat on the mattress. “You can smell that?”

“You’re pregnant, Ella,” he mutters, a little laughter still in his voice as he moves lower on the mattress himself, tugging my pajama pants off and leaving me only in my plain

bra and cotton panties. I certainly hadn't worn anything s*xxy or alluring – I hadn't known this was on the table. Beautiful," he mutters, and then slowly moves to cover my body again with his own.

I grasp his face as he brings it close to mine. "Wait," I protest, glancing towards our bathroom. "let me go brush my teeth – corn chips – oh my god –"

"No," he laughs, pushing me back on the bed. "It's not your breath – it's in your skin –"

"Ewww," I groan, covering my eyes with my hand in mortification. "That's it. I'm not eating anything but pineapple for the rest of this pregnancy. I had no idea –"

"It's fine, Ella," he hums as he places a simple kiss on my throat. "You should eat whatever you want – you have to follow your instincts. Your body just telling you what it needs." He brings his face to mine, nudging my nose with his, coaxing a little smile from my mouth. "And when it makes you smell like a truck stop...I'll just. Set you right."

I can't help the laughter that bursts from me at this. His own warm laughter reverberates through his body as he begins the old ceremony. He moves slowly over me, caressing me softly, murmuring his praise and his love for me as he imparts his scent on every inch of my body. I feel myself relax immediately under his hands, closing my eyes and feeling him move over me, his chiseled muscles brushing against my skin. I feel a smile curling on my lips as he goes, planting small kisses on my skin alongside his scent whenever the mood strikes him.

That's new

–

the kisses are new – but so much of it...so much of the experience of him marking me is warm, and familiar, and brings me back to a time when I was so confused, and so frightened about my future and my place with him. A time when my body knew that it belonged to him, and his to me, where it sang that knowledge every time he touched me. But I had been so... naïve, and so afraid of what I didn't know.

And now? Tears fill my eyes as I realize how truly different it is. The marking itself is the same, the way he moves over me soft and warm and familiar. But the way I feel? So held, so treasured, so sure that this – this is right.

"Hey there," Sinclair murmurs, bringing his face close to mine and kissing a tear off my cheek. Everything all right?" He wraps his arms around me, apparently finished, resting his forehead against mine.

"

“Yes,” I sniff, giving him a smile and nodding to let him know it really is okay. “It was just...really nice.”

“I thought you’d like it,” he whispers, stroking my hair and giving me a smile. I yawn then. I’m not sure I knew how tired I was. “You go to sleep now, little mate. Dream about me.”

“No,” I mutter, shaking my head a little. “I’m only going to dream about corn chips. My one true love.” I hear him chuckle as I start to drift off to sleep. “I’m behind the nest and the corn chips now?” he asks softly. “This competition is rough...”

But his voice fades away, and soon I’m in the forest, dreaming. And I know precisely what I want. So, I call for him and patiently wait.

Chapter 279 – Trouble

Ella

“Took you long enough,” I call out when he finally appears. I’m seated on that copy of our bed in the starlit woods. It feels like hours have passed for me, but there’s no way to really know. Time works different here. It was probably just minutes, and my wanting him so badly that made it feel , longer.

“Really,” Sinclair murmurs, his eyes sweeping over me as I sit perched before him, wearing a dark- blue negligee that mirrors the white one I wore the first time we met in this dream state. I toss my hair over my shoulders, letting him smell the arousal on me, letting him know what it is that I want.

He prowls towards me, dressed only in his familiar black dress pants, but with no shirt to block my view of his chiseled abs, the swell of his muscular chest. I feel my mouth go a little dry as I look at him, letting myself want him. He stops at the edge of the bed, towering over me, my heart starting to pound behind my ribcage.

“And here I thought I was going to get a peaceful night’s sleep tonight,” he murmurs, his eyes lingering on the swell of my breasts against the silk of my lingerie.

“Oh,” I reply, raising my eyebrows and pretending to be innocently surprised. I shrug. “Well, if that’s what you want,” I lower myself backwards to lean on my elbows, laying my body out before him and nodding at the space next to me. “Please, make yourself comfortable. I won’t bother you while you nap.”

“Liar,” he smirks, his eyes flashing as he crawls over the bed so that he looms over me. “I know you, trouble. You won’t be able to keep your hands off me.”

“Oh?” I ask, blinking innocently. “Want to see me try?”

“No,” he growls, grabbing me by the neck and pulling my face forward to his. “No, I don’t want that at all.” Then, with aching slowness, he lays his body inch by inch on top of mine. I let my head fall back, my skin singing at the touch of his. So much of this is a repeat of what we were doing just a little bit ago, but the innocence, the restraint, is gone. The feeling of him pressed against me makes me loose with desire, the weight of his body on mine making me moan with wanting him.” There, good girl,” he murmurs against my neck. “That’s what I want. Moan for me.”

My breath starts to come short as I stroke my hands down the hard swell of the muscles of his back, pressing him tighter against me. I can feel the length of him hard and ready, pressed between my legs. I shift my hips, eliciting a growl from him as I grind slowly against that hardness. I press harder, liking the sound, making him want me as much as I want him. I feel myself growing wetter, my body desperate for the feel of him inside me.

“Slow down, trouble,” Sinclair rumbles, pulling his face back to look me in the eye.

“Why,” I ask. Sinclair never stops what could be I freeze, panic slicing through me, making my eyes fly wide. “Wait, do you think it’s....is it bad? Is it dangerous for the baby? Should we...”

“It’s fine,” he assures me, his eyes gentle as he shakes his head. I take a deep and shuddering breath, relaxing against him. I hadn’t even thought hadn’t thought to consider

—

“It’s all right, little mate,” he whispers to me, pressing a soft kiss to my mating mark, making me shiver. “As real as this all feels, it’s all in your mind. Your body is resting, peacefully asleep. What we do here doesn’t affect your physical being.”

“Okay,” I whisper, running my hands through his hair. “I just wanted you to slow down,” he continues, kissing my clavicle and then moving lower to press a kiss between my breasts. “So that I could make sure I get to taste as much of you as I want to before I let you have me.”

“Let me have you?” I laugh, gasping a little as he licks a broad stroke up the center of my belly. “As if I couldn’t take you whenever oh...” my head falls back though as he silences me with his mouth, placing it right where I’d want it to go.

I groan as Sinclair slowly licks me, dragging his tongue over my clit, torturing me with its softness, his languorous pace. He gives me a low little laugh, pressing my hips back down when they buck instinctually towards him, urging him forward, begging for more, more. He continues at his torturous pace until I’m panting for him, my eyes pressed shut.

“Go on, Ella,” he urges, pulling his tongue away for just a moment and making me want to scream. “Beg me.”

“Please,” I moan, fisting the sheets in my hand.

“Good girl,” he murmurs and then, obligingly, lowers his mouth back to that little bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs and licking me roughly, sliding two of his thick fingers inside of me as he does. I come absolutely to pieces at the sensation, crying out as shudders wrack through my body.

He carries me through my orgasm, his tongue pressed hard against me. Then, when my chest is heaving and my eyes are pressed shut, he raises himself to hover over me.

“Ella,” he murmurs, turning my face to his wit at me, Ella.” a gentle press of his finger against my jaw. “Look I obey, opening my eyes and staring into my mate’s glowing green

gaze.

“Feel me,” he orders, and I obey again, reaching down between us to grasp the thick velvet warmth of him, moving my hand slowly across his head. A shudder passes through him and he presses his eyes closed for a moment, and then looks back at me. “Ask me for it,” he demands.

“Please,” I beg again, not knowing what else to say, and he lowers his own hand to grasp the base of his cock, angling it so that it’s pressed against my entrance, but no further.

“Come on Ella,” he teases, laughing at me a little, riling me. “You said you could take me whenever. So? Make me.”

“Please, Dominic,” I moan, “I want you I want to feel you inside of me –” And it’s true. I feel myself pulsing, wanting him again, greedy despite the body-shaking pleasure he just gave me. I want more.

“Make me, Ella,” he growls, making my eyes fly open to hold his own. He presses himself just the tiniest bit inside of me then, just the tip of him widening me, stretching me for him, making me gasp in anticipation, remembering what it feels like to have all of him in me – all at once –

“Oh god damn it,” I gasp, unable to stop myself from dropping the sheets from my hands and grabbing his hips, pulling him forcefully forward. “Please, Dominic – f*ck me now – I need you –” With a mighty growl, my mate obliges me with a single heavy thrust that sheathes him deep within me. I cry out as he fills me, wrapping my arms around the expanse of his back and sinking my teeth into the skin of his shoulder. He shouts as well, a shudder rocking through his frame as his body, his need, takes over, pulsing the thick length of him hard inside of me. Dominic is not gentle as he pounds his hips against mine but I don’t want him to be – not now – it’s been so long

– we need this –

My own body meets him stroke for stroke as I cling to him, the pace of my breath matching his, my hips rocking up so that his every plunge goes deeper, harder, faster, bringing him to his end.

His breath is ragged as he pulls his head away from its spot by my shoulder. He doesn’t slow his pace, not an instant, but he breathes my name, making me open my eyes again and meet his own.” Look at me,” he orders me. “Look at me.” And so I do I look him in the eye as he reaches his climax, my own building in me. I connect with him through our bond, passing him everything that’s in me – all my love, all my desire for him, all of the dedication, the passion that he rises in my soul. And as he shudders into his climax,

releasing a heavy groan as he spills himself into me, he passes the feelings back, confirming and reaffirming his commitment, his love. I gasp my own release, pressing his hips hard against me as another orgasm shakes itself loose, leaving me boneless and exhausted against the sheets.

Sinclair collapses a little against me, shifting his weight so as not to crush me beneath him, his limbs trembling. "God damn it, Ella," he pants, resting his forehead against my chest. "What you do to me...it's like..."

"Nothing I've ever felt before," I finish for him, one of my hands in his hair, the other drifting slowly over the sweaty skin of his upper back.

We lay like that for a long time as I stare up at the stars just visible between the trees, just relaxing with each other, content to just be wrapped up in each other's arms. I start, though, when I hear a little snorting nose next to me. I give Sinclair a rough shake.

"Did you did you just fall asleep?" I demand, shocked.

"Wha-?" he mutters, blinking up at me. "You just snored!" I accuse, laughing. "Can you do that? Can you fall asleep in a dream?"

"I don't know, Ella," he murmurs sleepily, putting his head back down on my breast and wrapping his arms around me. "With you, anything's possible. Take it as a compliment. You wiped me out. Now let me rest, woman."

I laugh a little, putting my head back on the pillow and looking back up at the sky, content. True, we may not be able to do this in our real bodies for a while. It was going to be a long three months.

But if we can't have that? Well, at least we have this. So I tilt my head back, and relax, and let myself dream. At least I do for a while, until my mate wakes up, rock hard, and starts it all again.

Chapter 280 – Doctor’s Appointment

Ella

The next morning I’m up and dressed early, eagerly glancing towards the door every few minutes because I know Cora is coming to see me. It’s a social visit as well as a medical one—I run my hand over my belly, eager to hear what she has to say about Rafe’s growth and progress.

A hear someone at the door of my bedroom and I gasp, spinning towards it. But I just scowl when I see that it’s Sinclair standing there, smiling at me, and not my sister. He bursts out laughing when he sees my disappointment

“Really?” he asks, pretending to be hurt as I pick up the television remote and start to flick through the channels. “Days ago you were desperate to see me – have I fallen out of favor so fast?”

“No,” I sigh, looking up at him apologetically. He gives me a warm smile, his eyes flicking over me, making sure I’m okay. “I just can’t wait to see her. And she was telling me some really weird things about her and Roger – actually, has he said anything Sinclair holds up a hand to me, stopping me and glancing down the hall to where someone is climbing the steps.

“Cora!” I cry, throwing my legs off of the bed and working to hoist myself up. Sinclair moves aside and I see Hank and Cora at the door.

“No no –” Doctor Hank says, putting out a hand towards me, palm out. “Stay in bed, Ella – no need to get up. We’ll come to you.”

I frown at him (for more reasons than one) but stay on my bed Luckily, Cora gives a little shriek of joy and throws herself into my arms, where I get to wrap her up tight. I laugh and tell my sister how glad I am to see her while Hank, also smiling, places his bag on my side table and starts to unpack it.

“How are you feeling, Ella?” Cora asks, pulling back from me and putting a hand on my belly. “How is the baby?”

“Everything feels good,” I respond, smiling and shrugging. I look down at my stomach. “He’s just swimming around in there, giving me a kick or two every once in a while.”

“He should be too small to kick,” Cora wonders, frowning and probing my belly. “You’re only three months pregnant.”

“Three months pregnant is more like five or six months pregnant in wolf biology,” Hank informs us, popping his stethoscope around his neck and giving me a smile. “It’s easy to

get the timeline mixed up, especially if you grew up human and are really used to thinking about pregnancy in terms of how human babies grow and adapt.”

“Yes,” I say, nodding and looking down at myself. “I felt about five months pregnant a few weeks ago, in the desert would have sworn it. But now it feels like more? I don’t know. It’s confusing.”

“He’ll grow rapidly from here,” Hank murmurs, leaning forward and pressing the stethoscope to my back to listen to my heart and breathing. “If we can keep you healthy enough to maintain his rate of growth. Deep breath in, please.”

I do as he orders, smiling at Cora and then at Sinclair, still standing in the door. My checkup takes a while, with Doctor Hank focusing on my general health and then Cora performing a check on the baby. She even used a little portable ultrasound machine that Sinclair ordered so that we could do these kinds of checkups at home while I’m still weak.

I hold my breath through the whole process, desperately hoping for a good report. I’ve been quite good lately, even if it’s been boring – no stairs, spending most of my time in bed, really just doing nothing but getting fat on all the snacks Rafe demands and giving him the time and space he needs to grow strong.

“Well,” Cora says, finishing up the ultrasound and pressing “print” on the little machine so that we can have a picture of it “From my end, everything looks great.” She gives me a big smile.

“My end as well,” Hank says, smiling at me and crossing his arms. “Overall, Ella, you’re doing wonderfully, all things considered. But I have to remind you that you’re still quite fragile, medically, even if you are feeling better. The orders still stand – complete bed rest, as much as possible.”

Even as my heart lifts to hear that the baby and I are healthy, I scowl when I hear about more bedrest. I think, deep down, I was hoping that I’d be miraculously healed and able to be up and about until the baby is born. There’s so much I want to do.

Sinclair has been keeping me informed of what the world is like, and I’ve been keeping an eye on the news. The tentative ceasefire between the wolves and the humans is holding, though there are some humans who are protesting against giving in so easily, and Sinclair has initiated the start of peace talks between our two peoples. Still, there are so many on both sides who are displaced- so many mothers and their children living as refugees – I could do so much good if I could just.

“Are you all right, Ella?” Cora asks, looking at me closely.

“Yes,” I say, embarrassed a little to have faded off into my own thoughts there. “Just thinking I wish I could get out of bed.” I take her hand and squeeze it, looking between her and Hank. “But thank you – I understand that I can’t. It’s all for the best, and I can learn to be patient. Will you tell me, though?” I beg, looking up at the doctor who saved my life “When I can get up, or do a little more?”

“The minute you’re healthy for more activity, I’ll let you know. I promise I won’t hold you back He gives me a nod and the start of a smile, which I return brightly. I can tell he is warming up to me and I’m happy about it.

Doctor Hank surprises me, though, by reaching a hand out to Cora next. “Cora,” he says, “I’ll see you tonight?”

I watch Cora take his hand and give him a tentative little smile, accompanied by a blush. A blush. I can’t help my mouth from falling open a little. “Yes,” she says, giving his hand a little squeeze before dropping it. “I’ll see you at 8.”

The doctor nods to her and then heads towards the door, where Sinclair joins him to walk downstairs and further discuss my condition.

“Are you serious?” I hiss, leaning forward and staring at my sister the moment I think they’re out of ear shot. “Are you dating Doctor Hank?!”

“Ella,” she murmurs, looking down and blushing again. “It’s not like that – we’re just having dinner-”

“What about Roger!?”

“What about Roger?” She snaps, bringing up her gaze to glare at me a little. I sit back in shock. “I just thought...” I reply, hesitating. “You two were doing so well”

“Well,” she shrugs. “He hasn’t called me at all since...well, since after you got out of the hospital, Ella. Complete radio silence. And honestly, I’m not sure it’s the worst possible turnout.”

“But Cora,” I breathe, my heart in my throat. “You two—you love him –”

“Do I?” she asks, her voice a little bitter. “Or do you just want me to love him, sis?”

Chapter 281 – Sisters in Love

“That’s not fair, Cora,” I scold, narrowing my eyes and sitting back against my pillows as I cross my arms.

“Don’t you want it, though?” she accuses, opening her eyes wider as if she’d like to hear me deny it. “It would be very neat, wouldn’t it? Two sisters matched up with two brothers? Our kids would be so close – they wouldn’t even have another set of cousins!”

“I think that sounds amazing!” I exclaim.

“Ella!” she cries, throwing up her hands. “There can’t be any kids!”

My mouth drops open as my mind whirls and Cora glares at me as I start to put my thoughts together. To begin, Cora,” I say, holding up a finger and beginning my argument. I feel, in this moment, that my hours of television post-hospital have benefitted me here – I’ve watched a lot of law dramas, and I lay out my argument like any lawyer in a court room. “Do you even want kids? Because ever since we left the orphanage, I was always the one who was crazy to be a mom, and you were always interested in building your career

“What,” she snaps, crossing her arms, “just because I have a career means I don’t want kids?”

I take a deep breath through my nose. She’s really starting to piss me off now, like a real sister which, of course, she always has been. “Obviously I don’t think that, Cora, and you’re doing me a real discredit by suggesting that I would. I’m just pointing out that it’s never seemed like children were at the top of your list of life desires! But now you’re using it as a reason to break up with Roger!?”

“There’s nothing to break up! We weren’t even going out!” She blurts out, frustrated and defensive. I just shake my head at her, waiting until she looks at me again, which she does after a moment of breathing deeply and pulling herself together.

“Even if you weren’t officially dating, Cora,” I continue. “You know that there was something between you. That there is something between you! Something big. Don’t insult my intelligence by trying to pretend that there wasn’t.”

Cora sighs, folding her hands in her lap and looking down at them. I wait, my patience running thin. “All right, Ella,” she murmurs, still not meeting my eyes. “There is something there. Of course there is Roger he makes me...”

She sighs, unable to put it into words, and I lean forward, adding my hand to my sister’s in her lap, letting her know that I hear her. She looks up at me then, tears in her eyes. “I just don’t know what future there is with us. And I’m scared to...to put my time and my

heart into this if I know it just has a bad ending. Why even try, if he's going to leave me for someone who can give him children?"

"Well, that brings me to my second point," I say in a hurry, shaking my head at her in wonder. "If you're so against dating a werewolf because of your biological differences, then why are you dating Doctor Hank?"

Cora's jaw drops open at this. "Ella..."

"What?" I demand, leaning forward Cora bursts out laughing, raising her hand to her mouth and shaking her head at me, a little good-natured pity in her eyes "Ella, Hank is human"

"What!" I gasp, sitting up dead straight. "No he's not – he's a wolf—he is a wolf doctor, he knows all about wolf anatomy-" Cora just laughs harder, falling back on the bed and cackling at me.

"She's right," I hear, and I spin to my mate who I didn't hear approaching the room "You didn't know?" Sinclair asks, leaning against the door frame. "You couldn't smell it on him?"

"What!" I repeat, looking between the two of them, apparently unable to come up with any other exclamation "What!?"

Sinclair joins Cora in her laughter, shaking his head at me and giving me a fond look. I turn a little red with embarrassment and throw pillows at both of them. "Stop laughing at me! How was I supposed to know!"

Cora sits up then, whipping her eyes. "Don't you have like, extra senses that are able to tell you these sorts of things?" she asks, smiling at me, I think happy to have the upper hand again

"Well, sorry I was too busy dying to get a good sniff of him," I grumble, throwing another pillow at her and looking bashfully at Sinclair. "But seriously, if he's human, why does he know so much about wolf biology? Why is he such a great wolf doctor?"

"He dated a wolf in med school at Harvard, apparently," Cora explains, calming down and taking a deep breath now. I lean forward to listen, glad that she's not yelling or laughing at me anymore. She let him in on the secret and he was fascinated. He also saw the opportunity to break into a relatively small medical field and be the top man at the job."

"It's true," Sinclair adds, nodding to me. "While shifters of course have our own medical personnel, not many shifters themselves are drawn to the years' worth of study and toil

that it takes to become a doctor. It's not that we're stupid or lazy," he shrugs, "just we tend to be drawn to more physically engaging jobs."

"Oh," I say, curious, my mind drifting towards my baby. Does this mean he's going to be a jock? I was kind of hoping he'd be a nice quiet nerd, so I could keep him home forever. "So, are a lot of wolf doctors humans?"

"Not a lot," Sinclair responds. "But enough. I mean, you saw it – in order to get fertility treatment, I had to go to a human sperm bank. It's a lucrative field, if you can break into it and are quite good at the work. And if, like Hank, you can learn the culture enough to communicate effectively with your clientele. It was helpful to me, when you were ill, that he recognized my Alpha tendencies and was able to respond appropriately."

"Well," I say, glancing at him a little ruefully. "Sounds like everyone is team Hank now except for me." Sinclair frowns and straightens up. "You don't like Hank? Did he do something."

"No," I say, holding up a hand and stopping him from chasing the poor man down and baring his fangs to demand what he did to offend me. "He's fine. I'm just." I sigh, and tip my head back, staring at the ceiling. "I was just rooting for someone else." I give Cora a little glare.

"Well," she says, giving me a prim little shrug. "In this case, it doesn't matter who you root for, because I'm the referee. And I don't listen to the fans."

Sinclair just looks between us, his face screwed up in confusion. "What the hell are you two talking about?" As one, we turn towards him and give him simultaneous sisterly glares. "Nothing," I say, snapping my mouth shut. "Sister stuff," Cora replies haughtily. "You wouldn't understand."

Sinclair just puts his hands up, admitting defeat. "No worries," he concedes, "I don't want to know anyway. I'll go downstairs and get you guys some snacks. Do you want anything in particular? "Oreos!" I shout as he goes. "And hot sauce! Celery with peanut butter on top!"

Cora laughs, leaning forward and poking me in the belly. "This little guy has a weird appetite," she says, grinning. "Yeah," I say, sighing as I look down at my body and wonder what he's thinking in there. "He's got my tastebuds all screwed up."

We're quiet a moment before I start again. "Cora," I say, rubbing my stomach. She looks up at me. "Just don't count him out, okay?"

She frowns, opening her mouth to say something, but I put up a hand, asking her to let me finish. Slowly, she pulls her mouth shut and lets me continue.

"I won't bug you about it, I promise," I continue. "But just don't close the door completely, okay? Not until you're really sure."

"Okay, Ella," she agrees, giving me a little smile. "I won't close it completely."

We grin at each other for a second, but then I can't help myself. I lean forward, eager. "So, did you and Doctor Hank kiss yet? Is he good at it?"

"Ella!" Cora exclaims, laughing. Then she grabs one of the pillows I threw at her and swings it playfully at my head.

Chapter 282 – Hell on Wheels

Ten days pass with agonizing slowness and I think I'm going to lose my mind. On the morning of the eleventh day I just sit in my bed, staring passively at the tv, flicking through the channels and not even caring what comes on. I've seen it all, anyway.

It's not that I haven't tried to keep busy in bed. In fact, I've tried everything. I've sent email after email to all of the aid organizations I can think of, asking if there's any way that I can help from home. They all came back with pleasant congratulations and urges for me to concentrate on my improved health. I scowled at each one of them as I deleted them and silently wondered if Sinclair had anything to do with it, just a quiet word to each of the organization heads that I wasn't to be engaged until after the birth of my child.

When that fails, I try a variety of crafts I've always wanted to get into but have never had time for. But it turns out that knitting is crazy boring, and I'm a terrible painter, and I'll never cut it as a novelist because I can't stitch two words together. When hobbies failed, I tried educating myself, downloading a few language apps so I can become the polyglot I've always wanted to be. But, I swear to god, if that little owl pops up on my phone one more time urging me to practice my French...

Well, let's just say that while I've always braked for birds, I won't be doing that anymore.
(2)

So, now, it's just me and this damn tv. And my brain slowly rotting to much as I sit here on bed“, rest.” Even though it's bed torture.

And it's not that Sinclair isn't kind. We meet every night in the dream space, but in our waking hours he only has so much time. He's working so hard to bring our people together, to unite human and wolf kind, and I don't have the heart to tell him that I'm so bored I've tried to see how many Oreos I can stack on my forehead before they all come crashing down around me.

(Eighteen.)

I know that if I even gave him a hint that I was miserable, he'd drop everything and come to my side, entertain me, make me laugh. But what kind of queen would I be if I took him away from our people? I know that I have to be strong but...damn, it's hard. Who would have thought that a charge through a shelled city towards a temple I could handle, but laying in bed for ten days is really the thing that takes me out?

The only real relief I find is when I am in the dream state, either with Sinclair or alone, so I spend as much time as I can sleeping or napping. I feel freest when it's just me. I love my time with my mate, when we spend our night hours touching and holding each other in ways we can't in the real world, but when I'm alone? I transform into my wolf and run –

I run through rivers and up the sides of mountains, feeling the snow crunch beneath my paws. I run through moonlit forests and drink from silver lakes. I sprint across deserts, the pads of my feet so swift they barely touch the sand. Sometimes, when I look over my shoulder, I see a little pup running along with me, giving little yips of satisfaction and joy. He's not always there, but when he is, I feel my heart could burst from the joy of it.

But a girl can only sleep so much, especially when she's got nothing to do all day but sit around.

So that's what has landed me here, flipping through channel 826. Passively, I wonder what happens after I hit channel 999. Does it go back to 0? Or does it just go on... forever....

Suddenly I sigh and toss the remote across the bed, giving a little growl of aggravation. Damn it, I need something to do. I'm a wolf, after all. We weren't meant to lay in bed all day, passive. I have to get up, I have to move around and see things.

For the millionth time, I wrack my brain, trying to come up with a solution, wondering how the people I love would handle it. Cora, of course, would grit through it, the way she did med school – just putting her head down and enduring the unpleasantness, knowing the great reward is coming at the end. Sinclair...well, he would probably ignore the doctors and push forward with his life. And while that sounds amazing, I promised I wouldn't.

I slump down against my pillows, running through all the people I know, when suddenly my mind alights on Sinclair's father. Henry.

I gasp, inspired, and grab for my phone. As quickly as I can, I pull up his contact information and call him, crossing my fingers and praying that he picks up.

"Hello?"

"Henry!" I burst out. "Henry, I have a great idea. Can you help me out?"

A few hours later, the house is full of people. "Yes, this is perfect," I breathe, holding on to the service technician's arm as he lifts me from the bed. My head snaps up as I hear a ragged snarl rip across the room.

"Get your hands off my mate." I hear Sinclair demand, his voice livid with a murderous threat. The technician spins and, when he sees the huge werewolf in front of him ready to rip his head off, starts to shake so hard he almost drops me.

"No!" I cry as the technician starts to put me back down on the bed. I point a finger in his face, giving him a harsh look and speaking in my best Luna voice. "Don't you dare put me back in that bed. I will flip out."

Torn, the technician whips his head between me and the doorway, not knowing what to do and fearing for his life either way.

Suddenly, Sinclair pulls me from the technician's arms before I can say a word and holds me close against his chest. "Get out," he growls at the man, his voice low. "And if I ever see you again – even once in your life –"

I hear the rapid patter of feet and know that he's gone, but I try to peek around Sinclair's shoulder anyway. "Seriously!?" I cry, glaring up at him. "You had to scare him off like that?!"

"He had his hands on you, Ella," Sinclair snarls, and I can see the rage still alight in his eyes. I smirk, a little pleased by his jealousy beyond my annoyance. Sinclair narrows his eyes at me for a moment and then looks to the side at the shiny new wheelchair sitting there, waiting for me."

What the hell is all of this, Ella?"

"My salvation," I say, beaming at the chair with love in my eyes, admiring its gleaming wheels and all of the buttons on its control board. "It's state of the art – I'll be able to –"

"Ella," my mate snaps, drawing my attention back to him. "You were commanded to stay in bed."

"This is bed-adjacent!" I cry, defiant. "It's the same thing, basically! I sit up in bed, why can't I sit in a chair!" "That's not the point," he explains, angry. "You're supposed to be resting, healing."

"Dominic," I interrupt, letting my face drop so that he can see the desperation beneath. "Please. This is..." I shake my head, hoping he will understand. "It is killing me to sit around all day doing nothing. Please, Dominic. I won't even leave the house. I just have to get out of bed."

My mate pauses for a moment, staring down at me, his eyes softening. "Ella," he says, working hard to keep his voice even. "If you were so miserable, why didn't you tell me –"

But I just slowly shake my head and his words fall away. He knows why. He nods, understanding, and then heaves a big sigh, turning and carrying me out into the hall where workers are buzzing around at the staircase.

"And what are these ones doing?" He asks, yielding to me. "They're putting in my stairlift," I reply, my eyes bright and my words breathless with wonder. "Isn't it amazing?"

“Ella,” he scolds, shaking his head at me. “What is all of this even going to do.

“It’s easy!” I exclaim, feeling true enthusiasm for the first time in a week. “Your dad helped me set it up – just a chair upstairs, and a stairlift, and a chair downstairs, and I have full run of the house! It’s amazing, and I never have to get up! Even Doctor Hank and Cora said it was okay.”

Sinclair takes another deep breath, holding my gaze, but a huge smile bursts onto my face as I see him visibly give in.

“All right, trouble,” he murmurs, carrying me back into the bedroom where he places me gently in my new chair. “But I have a feeling that this is a terrible idea.”

“No! The best idea!” I cry, pressing the forward control on the chair and zooming out into the hall. “It’s going to be great!” Immediately, I hear Sinclair skitter out into the hall after me when he hears the crashing sound that I make, totally by accident. His face is terrified.

“Um,” I say, biting my lip and looking down at the poor broken vase I knocked on the floor. “You didn’t like that one...right?”

Chapter 283 – Zoom zoom

Sinclair

A crash sounds upstairs. The second one today. I groan and put my head in my hand, honestly not wanting to know. “Dominic?” I hear my mate call, requesting my assistance. I press my eyes shut, ignoring her for just...just one minute. “Dominic!”

“Seriously,” Roger murmurs, looking towards the door. “What were you thinking, letting her put this insane plan into action?”

I drop my hand and glare at my brother. “Ask me that again when you’re mated,” I murmur, steeling myself as I head out of the room. Roger doesn’t say anything as I go, though I feel his eyes on me. I ignore it.

“Ella?” I call from the base of the stairs. The seat of her stairlift is at the top, so she must be up there. “Dominic!” Her faint voice comes to me, sounding relieved. “Can you come help? I’m...stuck.” I sigh and pull myself up the stairs.

Three days. Three days she’s had her wheelchairs and her stairlift, and while I’m pleased to see her spirits raised, it’s been a nightmare for me. Three days of watching her zoom around, crashing into every thing I own. I’ve already imagined six thousand ways this could go wrong – Ella sliding off of the stairlift and tumbling down the stairs, Ella somehow miraculously managing to run herself over with the chair, Ella crashing through the banister and flying through the air like Evil Knievel...

And you’d think that I was kidding, or exaggerating, but...

As I get to the top of the stairs, I turn to see her wedged, somehow, behind a potted fern in the corner. “How did you even...do this?” I ask, exasperated, as I walk over to her. She gives me a bright, if embarrassed, little smile. “I don’t know,” she shrugs. “I just...went forward, and it was there...”

I sigh again – my three hundredth sigh of the day and lift the plant, freeing her. She zooms backwards in the wheelchair, grinding potting soil from the plant into my carpet as she goes. I sigh again. Three hundred and one.

“What are you even do-” I start, but she’s off already, waving to me as she heads down the hall towards our bedroom. “Things to do!” she calls, waving over her shoulder. “Go back to work, I’ll catch up with you later!”

I shake my head, following her into the bedroom, eager to put a stop to this. “Ella,” I demand, striding in after her. “This has to stop – I’m going insane with worry –”

“What!” she exclaims, appalled, turning her chair in a little half circle so that she’s facing

me. Why are you worried?" I pause, staring at her, my mouth hanging open a little with my incredulity.

"What?" she demands, frowning her pouty little mouth at me. "Tell me!" I shake my head. "Ella, in the past three days you've broken hundreds of dollars' worth of ceramics alone –"

"Ceramics" she mutters, waving a flippant hand. "We can buy new pots who cares about that –"

"Ella!" I insist and she snaps her gaze up at me. I groan again and wipe a hand down my face, trying to figure out how to say this. "Sweetheart, you know I love you..."

She cocks her head to the side, narrowing her eyes at me, sensing a "but" coming. I oblige her. But, I continue, "baby, you're the..you're the worst wheelchair driver I've ever seen. I seriously don't even know how you ever got a driver's license, you are just so bad at."

"What!" she screeches. "I am amazing at this! What are you talking about?!" "Baby," I plead, putting a hand on my heart. "Please, please believe me when I say this – and I love you – but you are awful at this –"

She laughs at me then and I can't help but laugh with her. It's so ridiculous. But I'm so grateful that she finally sees my point. Now I can convince her to give up –

"You're just jealous," she asserts, giving me a clever, wolfish grin.

My mouth drops open and I don't even know what to say. Jealousy... has not even come into the equation. "Ella, seriously," I begin, but she interrupts.

"Seriously!" she picks up. "If I were bad at this, could I do this?"

She spins her chair then in a quick circle that lifts one of the chair's wheels off the ground. My stomach drops as I lurch forward, desperate to keep her from tipping over, but she just laughs at me as the chair rights itself, zooming out of my reach.

"Don't do that!" I gasp, glaring at her.

"What!" she counters. "I'm fine- this chair can't tip over, it's built into the design."

"If anyone can manage it," I caution, "it's you. Ella, please."

"Dominic," she sighs, shaking her head at me. "Don't you think you're being just a little overprotective? I mean, sure, I get stuck behind a potted plant or two." She shrugs. "So"

what? I'm fine." She gives me a bright, happy smile, and I have to say it goes to my heart. It's good to see her cheerful and engaged again. That's why I let this go on as long as I did, but honestly? It's enough.

She thinks I didn't notice, the past week or so, how miserable she's been. She thinks she hid it from me to let me go on with my work. But I noticed – of course I did, I could smell her misery on her, could feel it in my very bones. But I could also feel her pride every morning when she sent me off to start my day. In many ways that was the one thing keeping her together – the idea that she was doing this for the baby, and was letting me go for our people. That her misery was, in some way, an act of service for a greater good.

So I went, spending as little time on my work as I in good conscience could, and otherwise spending my time curled up with her, my troublesome little rose-gold mate.

I shake my head a little as I stare at her now, as she smiles up at me. My sweet, clever girl. How do I do this? How do I help her find the balance between misery and keeping herself safe?

"For today, then, Ella," I say calmly, putting out a hand towards her. "Enough chair for the day... my nerves are absolutely at their end. Please. For me. I'll come to bed – we'll watch a movie –"

She pretends to consider it for a moment, tapping her chin as I take a step closer to her, intending to pick her up and carry her to bed. But then, at the last second, a wicked gleam comes into her eyes.

"Nope!" she quips, flicking her fingers over the command board and zooming past me, right out of my grasp. "Ella!" I cry, growling as I turn to watch her fly out of the room.

"If you want to stop me," she calls over her shoulder, "you'll have to catch me!"

Something in me, despite myself, lights up at this little taunt. A growl grows inside of me as I launch myself after her, out into the hallway and to the top of the stairs where she's already seated herself on the stairlift, buckling herself in.

When she sees me coming for her Ella gives a little half scream, half cry of laughter and delight, pressing the button on her stairlift frantically to make it go faster. Luckily, as it was built for the elderly, it has one speed: glacial. I catch her with ease.

"Oh no you don't," I burst out, taking two steps down the stairs so that I'm even with her and pressing the emergency-stop button on the lift. Ella gives another little cry, laughing hard and beating her little fists playfully against me as I unbuckle her belt and lift her up into my arms.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Roger below, peaking out of the office and looking up at us like we're crazy. But I ignore him, carrying my mate definitively into the bedroom and laying her down on the bed. When she's settled I climb onto the bed as well, settling over her but holding myself up on my elbows and my knees, effectually using my body as a cage.

"Big brute Alpha," she pouts, poking me in the chest and wiggling disconsolately into the blankets. "Not letting me have any fun."

I can't help it. Looking down at my gorgeous mate, pouting up at me with those full lips, her full breasts heaving, her rose-gold hair spilled out around her...I'm instantly hard.

"You can have fun," I glower, lowering myself until my face is closer to hers, dragging my nose along the skin of her cheek and taking a deep breath of her incredible scent. "You just can't reenact Grand Theft Auto in our house." "I'm good at it," she whines, crossing her arms and pretending to be madder than she is.

"You're terrible at it," I murmur, mimicking her voice. "And you're forbidden from using the chair again until I can get my dad over here to give you some lessons."

"Forbidden?" she smirks, flicking her eyes over me, not failing to note the new hardness she feels pressed against her swollen stomach. "And what will you do to me if I... break the rules?"

"Punishment," I snarl, bringing my mouth close to hers, "will be swift. And without mercy." I lift one of my hands and slowly slide it down the length of her body, stopping only when I have a full handful of her ass.

And suddenly, her mouth is pressed to mine, gasping, pulling me down to her. She pulls a moan from me and I fall to my side, ever-conscious of the baby and not wanting to crush him though all I want to do is flatten myself against her, pin her beneath me until she's gasping with want for me.

Our kiss deepens and my mate pulls me against her, wrapping her legs around me and running the sharp edge of her teeth over my lips, wiping my mind of any thought but her – her naked, laid out before me – her soft lips wrapped around my cock – her –

"Sinclair," she gasps, pulling her face back from mine, and I freeze as I see fear on her face. "I – I think we should stop Panting, I pull back and take a minute to come back to reality. Suddenly, I'm horrified at myself for letting it go this far. I nod as well. "I'm – I'm sorry, sweetheart –"

–

“No,” she says, giving me a flash of a bright smile and shaking her head. “It’s okay – it’s wonderful – I just...” she bites her lip. “If we go any further, I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop. And the baby...”

I groan, rolling onto my back and covering my face with my hand, knowing that she’s right. Slowly, I nod my head, feeling guilty. God damn it, but she’s just so... I can’t help wanting to touch her, feel her – hell, wanting to bury myself deep inside her, if I’m being honest, whenever she’s around. Her body, her scent, her being all of it just sings to me.

Ella presses her body up against mine, nestling her head against my chest and heaving a sigh. I feel her relax, though, and work hard to even my breathing, forcing my muscles to ungrip. We stay that way for a few long moments, her tracing her fingers lightly over my stomach, me wishing despite myself, even though I wish I didn’t that she’d let that hand drift just a little lower...

“It’s going to be a long three months...” she murmurs, and I feel her shake her head slowly.

“Two and a half,” I breathe, the words coming from between my teeth. I drop my hand and raise myself to glare at her belly a little. “Two and a half, kid, okay? And then you’re out of there. And then I’m taking my mate back.”

Ella laughs, pressing a kiss to my chest as I rest my head back against the pillow. Two and a half months, I think. That’s it. And then all of my dreams would come true.

Chapter 284 – A Long 2 1/2 Months

Ella

One and a half months later, and I'm gigantic.

Gigantic.

"Five months wolf pregnant," I mutter, stirring my yogurt with a little silver spoon, "is about thirteen months human pregnant." Leaning back against my pillows, I raise the spoon to my mouth, but hesitate before taking a bite.

"What?" Sinclair asks, glancing at me from his spot on the bed, where he's reading some reports on his tablet. "Has it gone sour?"

"No," I murmur, stabbing the spoon back into the cup. "I'm just afraid if I eat another bite, this baby is going to get even bigger."

"Good!" Sinclair declares, grinning at my swollen belly and reaching out a fond hand to rub my baby bump. "Let him get big and strong before he's born, that way he can come out running and we can play football within a week.

"Absolutely not," I snap, giving him a little glare and hoping to hell that he's kidding. "I am not growing you a linebacker, Dominic, so get that right out of your head."

Sinclair chuckles and puts his tablet aside, moving lower on the bed to press his ear to my stomach just above where the baby has settled. "What's that, little Rafe?" he asks, loud enough for me to hear. I twist my lips and shake my head a little, knowing this is all for my benefit anyway. If he wanted to talk to Rafe, he could just do it through his bond. "You're perfectly comfortable in there and want to go to full term so you can get big and strong?"

—

I feel the baby move, then, responding to his father's voice, pressing some extremity – a hand or a foot – across my skin, right where Sinclair's face is. Sinclair kisses the spot where the baby presses and I feel a little thrill of Rafe's happiness running through me.

"Tell him it's not true, Rafe," I say aloud, stroking the sides of my stomach, which looks honestly like I've swallowed a giant watermelon. "Tell him you're cramped in there, and would like to stretch out in your comfy little baby bed."

Rafe connects with both of us then, his emotions ringing with happiness, but, indeed, with a little ...pinched feeling, with the desire to stretch. "See?" I say, raising my eyebrow at Sinclair as he looks up at me with a big smile. "He's sick of it too. Time for baby to be

born!”

“Well,” Sinclair sighs, sitting up and giving my belly one last pat. “We’ll see what Cora and Hank say this afternoon at your checkup. Sometimes wolf babies come sooner than six months.”

“Really?” I ask, excited.

“Sure,” he shrugs. “It’s not common, but...”

“Well,” I consider aloud, “maybe since he’s one quarter moon goddess...he’ll come fast, and leave me in peace. I wonder what their average gestation period is...”

Sinclair just laughs, coming to my side and putting out his hands to help me to my feet. I accept readily and head to the closet, eager to get out of my pajamas and head to this appointment.

I smile secretly at my mate as he heads back to flop onto the bed, continuing his work while I get ready. He’s been so sweet and supportive, even though I’ve been a bit miserable for the past two weeks, but especially this last one. There’s been some trouble, I know, with human insurgents who are unhappy with how well the peace talks are going. They think that humans are getting the short end of the stick and are threatening violence unless Sinclair and his teams make more concessions. I know it’s stressing him, but he still makes a great deal of time for me in his day. I’m so grateful for him, for my sweet attentive mate.

As I pull on a clean top and stretchy pants, I consider whether I complain too much about this final stretch of my pregnancy. It’s not that it’s not that I’m not enjoying being pregnant – I have loved every minute of feeling my little boy grow stronger inside of me, every little twist and kick, and especially feeling the little messages he sends down our bond to me. He’s gotten so communicative lately, really responding to us like a little baby might telling us how he feels and what he wants.

It’s all been so wonderful. It’s just...I am so uncomfortable now. I’ve always been a petite woman, and even though Rafe was little at the start, it’s very clear that he’s Sinclair’s baby now. He is heavy, and he presses on my back, and my ankles are swollen, and I can’t find a comfortable spot when I sleep – even in my nest...

So, I admit that I’m a bit torn. As much as I love being pregnant, and I’m so happy and grateful for it, it in many ways feels like the end of a wonderful vacation where you start to think about how nice it will be to go back home. I sigh and lean down to pick out a pair of sneakers but stop, suddenly, when I realize that I can’t bend down far enough over my belly to grab them. So I straighten, glare at the shoes, and then kick them out of the closet so that they spill onto the floor of our bedroom.

When I peek out the door, Sinclair is looking towards the closet, his eyebrows raised. "Can you get those?" I ask with a big smile. "I need you to put them on my feet. Baby says no more bending."

My mate gives a warm chuckle and obliges me, coming to scoop up the shoes as I go to sit on the bed. "Sure thing, Cinderella," he smirks, kneeling down on one knee and lifting one of my feet up like the prince he is. "Let's see if the slipper fits."

When we get to the doctor's office, the receptionist gives us a big smile and takes us right back to a private exam room. I look around the crowded waiting room, opening my mouth to protest that we shouldn't be seen before all of these women who have been so patient, but Sinclair presses a hand to my back, ushering me forward. "I paid for this place, after all," he murmurs, giving me a smile. "You can accept just a little special treatment, just this once."

—

I hesitate but then let him herd me along, looking back over my shoulder and feeling guilty. It's true, though Sinclair brokered a deal with both Cora and Hank to have them on call for me at all times throughout the pregnancy. And, after Rafe is born, they'll be our personal physicians for our whole family. In exchange, though, they both requested that he set them up in private practice so that they can see refugee clients for free when we didn't need them. Judging by the swell of people in the lobby, they seem to be taking the latter half of the deal quite seriously.

My train of thought is interrupted by the sound of my sister calling a greeting to me, rushing down the hall to wrap me in a hug. "Ella!" she says, pulling back and looking me up and down. 'Wow, you're huge!'

"Thanks," I grimace, rolling my eyes and rubbing a hand over my stomach. "Just what every woman wants to hear when she walks into a room."

Cora gives Sinclair a nod of greeting and takes me by the arm. "It's different when you're pregnant and visiting your doctor who is your sister," she says, giving me a grin and taking me into the exam room. "We get cart blanche to say whatever we want." "If you say so," I mumble, hoisting myself up onto the exam table with a helping hand from Sinclair.

Cora begins the standard exam, asking me for details of how I'm feeling, if there have been any issues. I report that everything has been fine, just general pregnancy discomfort which I think is normal for the later months of a pregnancy. She nods and listens to the baby in my belly, taking my vitals and generally assessing the baby's growth. Hank comes into the room as she works, nodding warmly to Sinclair and to me.

When Cora is done, he performs his own basic exam of my general health as Cora gets the ultrasound machine working, ready to take a look at the baby.

"I All is going well until Cora puts the jelly on my belly and starts to move the wand around, looking at Rafe on the screen and taking some measurements. I'm smiling at the image of my baby, so well -formed and big and real on the screen when he was just a little blip a few months ago! But I snap my eyes to my sister when I hear her gasp.

"Ella," she says, turning to me and biting her lip. "What," I whisper, my eyes going wide. "What's wrong with my baby?"

Chapter 285 – Spicy Foods, Caster Oil, and...

“Nothing,” she says, shaking her head quickly and realizing her mistake. “I’m so sorry, Ella – I didn’t mean to scare you – he’s just...” she turns again to the monitor, shaking her head at what she sees.

“Cora!” I shout, sitting up fast and grabbing her by the shoulder. “Tell me! Now!” Sinclair is at my side instantly, a warm hand on my back as he peers down at the monitor. Hank likewise turns his head to the screen, curious.

“The baby is just huge,” Cora breathes, in awe. “If these measurements are right...” she shakes her head, looking up at Hank. “I mean, are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

Hank leans forward, considering, and then his eyes likewise go wide. He stands up and leans back, crossing his arms. “She’s right. That is a big baby.”

My breath starts to come short as I look frantically between the screen, my doctors, and my mate before finally settling on my stomach. Oh my god. Is he really huge? Was my idea that he was as big as a watermelon actually true? Is he so big that he’s going to be too large to come out, and so he’ll have to just stay in there until I explode –

“Don’t freak out, Ella,” Hank says, drawing my eyes up to his calm face. “It’s nothing drastic yet. Just...a big baby.”

“That’s a little bit of an understatement, Hank,” Cora says, glancing up at him. “Only a man would, say that a twelve pound baby, not even at full term, is nothing drastic.”

“I’m just saying,” Hank interrupts smoothly, professionally, keeping his eyes on me, “that the baby’s size is at this point no risk to himself or to you – which is really the important thing. Many women – even petite women, like yourself – have delivered twelve pound babies before.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, glaring down at my stomach. “But I’m sure they didn’t enjoy the experience.”

“She’s not even at full term yet, though,” Sinclair says, and I look up to see a worried frown on his face as he looks between Cora and Hank. “If the baby is twelve pounds now, in a month he’ll be...”

“Godzilla,” Cora murmurs unhelpfully, still staring at the screen and moving the wand around on my belly, assessing Rafe’s condition. I give her a little kick and she tosses a smirk in my direction

I ignore her and bite my lip, worried. “Seriously, if he continues to grow at this rate,” I fret, looking between my doctors, “what does that mean a month from now?”

“Well,” Hank says, considering me seriously. “If the baby gets too large to deliver naturally, we’ll consider a cesarian. But I think everyone in this room agrees that a natural birth would be preferable Cora?” He continues, passing her the proverbial baton. “What do you think?”

“I think...” she says, giving the screen one last glance and then looking at me and Sinclair. Honestly, guys, I think this muffin is baked. When I look at that screen, everything I see suggests a full-term baby ready to go. I am not as familiar with wolf deliveries as I’d like to be, but if you were a human woman I’d say that you were nine months pregnant and ready to pop at any moment.”

Hank nods. “I agree. I’ve been reading up on wolf pregnancies and found that six months is more of a deadline than an expectation. I think that your child could be born any day now and, from what we see in the exam, we have every reason to expect that it will be a healthy delivery.” He gives us a wide smile and Cora joins him.

“Congratulations, Alpha and Luna. You’re about to be parents.”

I sit up straight, a thrill running through me both at the anticipation that I could meet my baby soon and that this pregnancy could be done. “Really,” I breathe, looking at them with shining eyes. “Any day now?”

Hank nods happily. “You’ve done beautifully, Ella – your bed rest these past months has really allowed your body to heal and Rafe to grow. I’d say you’re just about as strong as any mom ready to give birth to her first baby. I think you can look to the next steps with confidence.”

I look up at Sinclair, then, my face alive with my happiness. He puts a broad hand on my cheek, bringing his face down to mine and placing a swift kiss on my lips. “You’re a miracle, Ella,” he whispers, sweeping his hand back to tuck my hair behind my ear. “I’m so proud of you, baby.”

—

My eyes fill with tears at my sudden happiness, my love for my mate, my child, our soon-to-be family. The entire pregnancy has been so full of anxiety – to be able to come into the final days of it happy, healthy, and confident...

It’s just such a blessing. And I don’t know what I’ve done to earn it. “Congratulations, sis,” Cora says, taking my hand and beaming at me. I give her hand a squeeze in return and use my other hand to wipe the tears from my eyes as Sinclair straightens up next to me, his hand still confidently on my back.

“Thanks,” I say, laughing my relief. “Thank both of you, so much, for your care. We

couldn't have done it without you." "Well, we're not finished yet," Hank replies practically, studying me. "Ella, considering that your baby is fully grown and ready to go, you might consider..."

"What?" I ask when he pauses, cocking my head curiously.

"Well, for your own comfort," he continues, "you might consider some... traditional methods. Of moving the pregnancy along. A twelve-pound baby is a large baby, and if he gets any bigger..." Hank looks to Cora for support.

"He's right," Cora says, looking from Hank to me. "We don't want to do a cesarian if we can avoid it, and we can always induce early if it comes to that, but it's always best for both mother and child if the mother's body goes into labor of its own free will. But, there are some folk remedies which can encourage that..." she begins to smirk.

"Like what?" I ask, frowning, trying to remember. "You can take castor oil," she suggests slowly, her smile growing. "Or eat some spicy foods. Go for a long walk." My eyes light up at the idea of a walk – god, I've been on bed rest for so long, the idea now that I could take a walk sounds amazing –

"Or," she continues, her smile now a grin, "you could...have s*x."

"What?" I breathe, my eyes going wide. I feel Sinclair tense next to me, his body going perfectly still.

Cora nods slowly, starting to laugh a little as she glances between us. "Yup. It's perhaps the most tried-and-true method to start labor. And considering that Ella's body is healthy, and the baby is ready to go," she shrugs, looking up at Hank for confirmation. "I don't see any reason not to."

Hank nods, clearing his throat and looking out the window, apparently eager to avoid eye contact with us. "Yup," he says briskly, suddenly very interested in a squirrel outside running up the trunk of a tree. "I see no reason to abstain any further, if you're -"

But there's no reason for him to finish his sentence, because Sinclair and I are already gone.

Chapter 286 – Home as Fast as we Can

Ella

The minute Hank gave his assent, Sinclair was moving, gathering me up into his arms and striding for the clinic's door. We drew quite a few eyes on our way out – a gigantic man carrying a little pregnant woman bodily out of the doctor's office, and her laughing with glee all the way. But I didn't care. I ignored them all, pressing myself close to Sinclair, eager for his warmth and his comfort and his love.

We don't say a word to each other on the ride home. Instead, I stare out the car's windshield with Sinclair's hand grasped in my own, my breath coming in short pants. My mind wanders back and forth between the thoughts of my child and my pregnancy, and the thought of my mate –

–

My mate his hard-muscled body, which I've wanted for weeks but haven't even dared

to

touch outside of the dream space, for fear of losing control. Of his mouth, hot on mine, of his thick, hard cock, pressing against me, slipping inside me and

“You have to stop,” Sinclair growls, glancing at me as he speeds through traffic, weaving in and out of slower cars with expert grace. “I can feel what you're thinking – I can smell it – and if you don't stop I'm going to pull this car over right here

”

“Do it,” I dare, smirking at him, squeezing his hand hard. “Pull the car over, Dominic.” Then, I let his hand go and lean forward, slipping my hand onto the soft wool of his suit pants, moving it slowly upwards.

“God damn it, Ella,” Sinclair growls, snatching my hand away and glancing a glare at me. “We didn't come this far to die in a car crash.”

I just smirk, settling back in my seat and closing my eyes, pressing my legs together against the steady ache that's growing there. Then, I lean my head back and let my mind wander, thinking about all the things I'm going to do to him the moment I get him in bed...

Sinclair's snarl rips through the car.

The door to our house bangs open and I see one of our housemaids start in surprise as

Sinclair storms through it, me in his arms. I barely manage to shoot her an apologetic look before Sinclair heads for the stairs, taking them two at a time. He moves with an agile grace, faltering only when I lean forward to press a kiss to his neck. He gives me a dirty look for torturing him, one that makes my stomach twist in anticipation, and then kicks our door open, heading straight for the bed.

Things slow down as we get there, though. Sinclair takes a moment to hold me close, lifting my face to his and kissing me deeply, as if never wanting to put me down. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back, letting him feel my joy at being able to hold him again, to be with his body the way that feels right to me, to let him feel my hunger and my desire. After a moment, though, Sinclair kicks the door shut behind us and lays me gently on the bed.

Then, he strips off his shirt and I get a good look at everything that I've been missing. My eyelids drift low as I take in my mate, the rippling muscles of his pecs and abs, the broad shoulders and the tight, tapered waist. God damn it, but I want to run my tongue over every tortured inch of him.

"So, Alpha boss," I tease, leaning back on my elbows and pressing my legs primly together. "What do you want to do now?"

Sinclair becomes a feral thing, a predator looking carefully at his prey, deciding precisely how he wants to pounce. He grips his belt, tugging it loose in a single jerk and pushing the waist of his pants so that they fall to the floor, his shorts going with them. And then he's standing naked before me, his proud cock rigid and eager.

Then, he moves, coming forward onto the bed, crawling over me as he did the last time we were close like this, making his body a cage over me, one from which I have absolutely no desire to escape. As he closes the space between us, I feel my pulse ratchet up even further, watching him move with unending slowness above me.

And suddenly, I realize that this is his game, and I smirk. I tortured him in the car, and now he's paying me back, making me wait while he lingers above me. The wolf in me rises

to

the bait, giving a snarl as I pull his face down to mine, claiming him. Mine mine mine.

He melts, then, giving in, his arms almost collapsing as he gives his body what it desires, which is to be close to me, with me, now. I twist to the side, not wanting him to crush me beneath him, and Sinclair lands next to me on the bed as I opening my mouth to him completely, letting him explore me with his tongue as I gasp and moan.

Sinclair's hands move fast now, quickly moving to my hips to shove my stretchy leggings down. He breaks his mouth away from me for a moment to tug the fabric free of my legs and ankles, and then briskly pulls my shirt and my bra up over my head in a flash. I laugh as he works, as eager as he is to be free of these materials, to feel him on every inch of me instead of the cotton that I've had pressed against my skin for weeks.

He growls through clenched teeth as he tosses the clothing away and I press my body fully against his or, at least, as close as I can get, with my gigantic stomach in my way. But I feel absolutely no shame or hesitation, which surprises me. I had always thought that I wouldn't feel s*xxy pregnant, with a big belly and swollen ankles making my body feel unfamiliar. But with the way Sinclair runs his hand along the length of me now – cupping my fully breast eagerly in his palm, moving his hand over the expanse of my body and dipping around my back to grip my ass – I feel so alive, and womanly, and desired. (1)

The hard, eager throb of Sinclair's cock against my leg only confirms this feeling, deepening it, as Sinclair repositions me, turning me so that my back is to him while I lay on my side.

"I can't wait any more, Ella," he murmurs, pressing kisses along my shoulder and neck, taking a moment to run the edge of his sharp teeth against my tender skin and making me shiver with anticipation. "I can't not be inside of you right. f*cking. now.

"

I press my backside against him, letting him know I'm ready, and he slips a hand between my legs, my assent confirmed by the wetness that coats his fingers as he strokes me, making me ready for him. "Good girl," he murmurs, and I shiver with pleasure as he moves his hand to his cock to spread my wetness there. "I've been starving for you for weeks."

Chapter 287 – Weeks to Wait

“Liar,” I murmur, glancing at him over my shoulder as he positions himself against my center, running his head up and down my s*x, teasing me. “You haven’t been starving. You’ve been f*cking me in my dreams. Wasn’t that enough to keep the hunger at bay?”

He chuckles lowly, bringing his cock back to my center and slowly beginning to press into me. “You tell me,” he says, gasping as he goes. “When I f*ck you in your dreams, does it feel anything like this?”

And suddenly I’m gasping too as he starts to fill me, my vision flooded with stars as I press my eyes shut and moan into the fabric of my pillow. Every inch of him stretches me, feeling like an unending fullness as I feel the swell of his head making room for the rest of him on its path deeper inside me. The sensation rips through me like a storm, the pleasure of it and my hips buck against him, urging him on, needing more

Sinclair gives a rough shudder as he finishes seating his length deep inside me. Then, he rocks his hips back, making me groan anew to feel him pull out an inch, and then slam again home. Sinclair wraps himself closer around me, one hand finding my breast as he repeats the action again and again, a rough, feral pounding over which neither of us have control. The sensation builds in me as his other hand slips over my hip, pressing against my swollen and greedy clit, and I cry out as he presses me there, increasing his pace as he does.

“I’m sorry,” he grits through his teeth, completely undone by the intensity of this after months of wanting, and abstaining, and holding back. “F*ck, Ella, I’m sorry – I can’t last – you’re so f*cking

–

And then he gives a final spasm and a cry and I feel him spill loose in me, the sensation warm and thick and rich, and the thought of it – of him bursting thick spurts of hot cum inside of me – makes me spill over, my orgasm making me rock my hips back hard against him, forcing him deeper against that favorite place inside of me that makes me shake and shiver.

We lay there for awhile, spent, my back pressed against his chest, panting quietly. “Ella,” he whispers after a moment, my name barely audible on his breath. “Are you...are you all right?”

I nod my head, my eyes closed, letting my body feel the afterthought of the shivers that still run through me from head to toe.

“No

,

”

he says, shaking my shoulder a bit. “I mean...the baby.”

My eyes fly open at the idea and I look down at myself, quickly assessing...

But...

“No,” I groan, suddenly disappointed. “No, no change, Dominic,” I whisper, turning to give him a little pout. “He’s still...in there. Determined never to come out.”

“Well then,” my mate growls, turning my face further to him and giving me a feral grin. “We’ll just have to keep trying.”

I sigh as I smile and can tell that Sinclair understands my emotions. It’s so wonderful to be able to be with my mate like this again, but if the point of all this is to somehow shake this baby loose? “I don’t know, Sinclair,” I say, running a hand over my stomach. “I’m not feeling anything like labor. I think we’re going

to

be in this for the long haul.”

He gives a little happy shrug, unperturbed at the idea. “Fine by me,” he murmurs, beginning to kiss his way down my body. “Just gives me more time to enjoy these s*xxy curves, while you’ve still got them.”

I laugh a little, awash with happiness as my mate kisses his way down my body. I suppose he’s right though – even if we do have weeks to wait, at least we can give the term “bed rest” a better definition.

—

We both go to bed a few hours later, sated and content after a long afternoon of being pressed close to one another. It’s not all s*x – though, of course, some of it is. But a great deal of our time is spent just holding each other close, letting our bodies fall into their old rhythms together, our breath and heartbeats aligning in a way they haven’t been able to do for weeks.

I drift off into my dream space feeling totally comfortable, not needing

to

invite Sinclair in tonight because I know he'll be there waiting for me when I wake up. It's not that I don't want him there tonight it's just...a peaceful bed at, where he dreams his dreams and I have mine to myself, separate but together. My body at ease, I eagerly drift off, anticipating my first night of deep rest in a very long time.

So it surprises me, a few hours later, when I wake to a deep ache in my lower back. I give a little moan of discomfort, twisting my aching muscles to ease them, but I only feel the ache grow deeper. I gasp a little as a sharp pain runs through me, starting in my middle and then radiating through my body. I frown down at my belly, running my hands over it, wondering what's up. Is it something I ate?...

Because of all things, it feels like...well, like I'm very gassy, maybe? Or starting my period? The pain fades, though, and I drift off to sleep for a little while longer.

I'm wrenched almost to a seated position, however, about ten minutes later when the ache begins again, this time deep and echoing through my muscles. I give a little gasping cry as the pain continues through my back and travels down the inside of my thighs.

Sinclair wakes next to me, sitting up and putting a hand on my shoulder. "Ella?" he asks, worried. "I'm okay," I murmur, giving him a look over my shoulder, rubbing my stomach. "I just think that.

"What?" he presses, worried. "Well," I say, turning and smiling at him. "Maybe that our afternoon wasn't such a waste after all." I give him a big smile and let him press his hands against my stomach.

"Really?" he breathes, staring down at my abdomen, fascinated. Then he looks up at me, curious. Did you ask the baby?"

I laugh a little and shake my head, the ache and the pressure in my lower stomach fading a little. "No," I say. "I didn't think to." Then, I close my eyes and reach for the baby. I can tell, immediately, that he's uncomfortable and eager for change. Not in a bad way, just...

"Wow," I say, my eyes flying open and taking in Sinclair's serious face. His eyes are closed as he too reaches out to Rafe, trying to figure out how he feels. Then, Sinclair's eyes open and he gives me a big smile."

"I think you're right," my mate whispers. "I think he's ready."

My face breaks into a big excited grin. I expect my mate to return it but he leaps suddenly from the bed, rushing to the closet. "Where are you going?" I ask, confused. "I'm getting the hospital bag!" he calls to me. "We have to go!"

I laugh a little at his panic. "Sinclair," I call, holding out a hand to him as he comes out of the closet, the bag in his hand and a look of panic on his face. "We have time – the contractions are still far apart."

"How far apart?" he asks, suspicious. "I don't know," I say, looking down at myself. "But they just started, and they don't hurt a lot yet. It takes some women hours."

"You're not a human, Ella," Sinclair says, coming to my side. "Wolves are different."

"Are they faster?" I ask looking up at him, suddenly worried and wishing I'd thought to ask Hank about this.

Sinclair runs a hand through his hair, glancing anxiously towards the door. "I don't know

,

"

he responds. I lean over and take his hand, pulling on it, dragging his attention back to me.

"Let's time them," I say, a little excited. "And we'll text Cora and Hank. I'd rather be here, after all, comfortable in my bed, if it's going to take a whole day for the baby to come."

"Ella..." he hesitates.

"Please, Dominic," I say, smiling up at him. "It's just a few minutes to time the contraction . What's the worst that can happen?" 4)

Chapter 288 – Hesitation

Sinclair

I sigh, sitting down on the bed next to my mate, giving her a significant look as I humor her. She grabs her phone, eagerly pulling up the clock timer and never taking her other hand off her stomach.

“Okay,” she murmurs, looking down at herself. “Well, this contraction has been over for a little bit,” she looks up at me. “Should we just wait for the next one to start the timer and time between that one and the next?”

I breathe out in a huff, closing my eyes and working very hard to control my anxiety and be patient. “Just start the clock and add two minutes to the time, Ella,” I beg. “Please.”

“Okay,” she says. Then I feel her hand on my cheek and I open my eyes to look down into her sweet, excited face. “It’s going to be okay, Dominic. You heard Hank. I’m strong – there’s no reason to rush off to the hospital yet.”

“There’s no reason not to,” I retort, giving her an even stare. But my little mate just wiggles herself closer to me, pressing herself warm against my side. I lower my head to her hair, my heart still beating fast with anxiety and anticipation, and take a deep breath of her warm scent. She’s right, at least a little – there’s no harm in waiting just a few minutes. As I work on my patience, I hear Ella clicking away on her phone.

–

“Okay,

”

she chirps. “I texted Cora she’s up, she says she’ll meet us there when we’re ready. But she says to text her the time between contractions when we’ve got it. She also says it could be false labor,” Ella notes, looking up at me with an interested expression. “Since it’s so early. So, we might be panicking for nothing.”

–

I murmur something back – I honestly don’t know what and wrap my arm around her, concentrating on being steady next to her, where she needs me. Ella is excited, but deep down I know that she’s anxious as well – how could she not be? Throughout this nightmare of a pregnancy, something’s gone wrong at every turn. I know that, like me, she’s on pins and needles, just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The next few minutes are torture for me. Every instinct in me tells me to get up and move, to prepare, to do something. I could go start the car, have it ready and pointed out to the street so that we can go the moment she's ready. I could double-check this hospital bag, although Ella's packed and re-packed it twelve times. I could go rip that ridiculous stairlift right out of the wall, now that we don't need it anymore,...

That, at least, would give me some satisfaction and burn off some of this anxious energy....

But, despite that impulse, I stay right here by my mate's side, where she needs me. There's no place else I'd dare to be.

"Ohhh," Ella says suddenly, her hand sliding low on her belly as she closes her eyes tightly." Okay," she breathes. "I think this is...another one."

I grab her phone off the bed next to her. Eight minutes. "Ella," I snip, "your contractions are only ten minutes apart. Please."

"Ten minutes," she says, frowning at the phone. "How is that possible, they just started –"

"Ella," my voice is low with warning and anxiety now. "Please we're going –"

"Fine," she says, raising her eyebrows at me and putting her feet on the floor. "I think it's too early but oohhhh," she winces, shuddering with pain and pressing her eyes closed.

–

"What is it," I breathe, leaning close and taking her hand. "What's wrong?" "It's just... sharp..." she says, her teeth gritted. "Ow, I didn't think it would hurt this bad so early..."

"Enough," I growl, scooping her up in my arms, my heart pounding. I head for the door but she stops me, slapping my shoulder.

"The bag!" she cries, and I spin, squatting down to grab it and then leaping from the room in one swift action. I pound down the hall, eagerly headed for the stairs. As I begin down them, though, Ella gives a sharp gasp and convulses in my arms, freeze, holding her close, my eyes tracing the pained lines of her face.

"Ella," I gasp, terrified. But there's nothing I can do I just hold her until she stops, until she opens her eyes and looks shocked into my face and then down at her belly, her face going white.

“Down,” she demands. “Put me down. Something...something happened.”

Ella

I’m still wrapped in his arms as Sinclair jolts back into action, hurrying to the bottom of the stairs where he can put me down. I feel a sudden wetness between my legs, a sticky warmth that...)

G*d damn it, all I can think of is the blood that I saw all over me on the temple steps when I’d nearly lost the baby, when I was so weak and exhausted

What if –

Did something go horribly wrong –

Sinclair reaches the bottom of the stairs as I cling to his shoulders, panic racing through me. He places me down steadily on my feet and I look down at myself, trying as best I can in the darkness to assess what I see –

“Light!” I call, wiping my hand down my legs, trying to assess –

Sinclair is instantly in action, flicking on the hall switch. Frantic, I look down at my hand but see ...clear. There’s liquid on my hand, but it’s clear. I give a frantic little laugh as I stare at my hand and then down at my soaked pajama shorts.

“Ella,” Sinclair gasps, taking me by my shoulders and making me look up at him, “Ella, please what’s wrong – what’s happening –”

“My water broke,” I explain, still laughing, a little hysterical with relief. “I’m all wet – because my water broke “Oh my g*d,” he murmurs, slumping back against the wall and putting a hand to his head. “Ella – I thought –”

“It’s going to be all right,” I say, coming forward and wrapping my arms around his waist. Sinclair, we’re going to make it. I think – I think we’re both just really freaked out, and traumatized, by everything that we’ve been through.”

He opens his eyes and looks at me then, shaking his head a little.

”

“But from here on out?” I insist, looking at him with full confidence. “Everything is going to work out. Easy as pie. And soon we’ll have our baby.”

He smiles at that, pausing his frantic energy for a second to brush my cheek with his finger and lean down and kiss me. But it doesn't last long. "You're right, trouble," he murmurs, pulling away." But if it's all right with you, I'll calm the hell down when we've got you safe and sound in a hospital bed."

"All right," I say, nodding. "But, um," I pause, and bite my lip, a little embarrassed.

"

Can you run upstairs first, and get me a change of pants? I can't...I can't leave the house like this. I look like I peed myself."

Sinclair sighs, rolling his eyes, but he sprints up the stairs as fast as he can to get me a change of clothes.

Five minutes later, we're in the car and on our way, me breathing deeply as I feel another contraction start to come on. I ride through the pain of it, Sinclair giving me worried glances as I do, but the pain passes. We are quiet, Sinclair concentrating on the road, and me on relaxing between contractions, which...damn it, are they speeding up?

The streets are mostly clear as we drive through the city – everyone's asleep now, anyway, and I close my eyes and try to relax, breathing deeply in anticipation of the pain that starts to flare in my back, the contraction that I know is about to rock through me.

Just as I feel the deep pulse of the pain begin, though, my eyes fly open as I hear Sinclair curse. "What the hell start, but the car twists suddenly to the side, skidding to a stop. And then, I scream.

Chapter 289 – Travel Disruption

Ella

The sound of gunfire rings out around us and I feel Sinclair lurch to cover me in the suddenly- still car. Trembling, I try to peek out from beneath his arm as he curses vehemently, his body tense over mine.

The gunfire ends and Sinclair moves, jolting back to the driver's seat and hitting the gas, spinning the car and heading away from the bullhorn that's suddenly blasting words in our direction.

"What's happening?!" I shout, begging for information, doubled over in pain as my body continues its contractions, not caring about the fact that we're suddenly, apparently, in a war zone.

"The insurgents," Sinclair growls, glancing over his shoulder. "Picked fucking tonight to push forward with their rebellion – god damn it –"

I glance over my shoulder as well, suddenly seeing a road block in the middle of the street with figures standing behind it, wearing masks and holding guns.

"Humans?" I ask, desperate. "Who don't want peace?"

Sinclair nods sharply, spinning the car around the city's center square. I look around suddenly – hadn't known where we were my eyes fixing on the temple, the palace, these familiar places I haven't seen in weeks – since

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Quickly, I dismiss the thoughts from my mind, not letting myself go there. "Can we go back? Can we get out of it?"

"No," he growls, speeding across the square and skidding to a stop in front of the palace. "They'll have us boxed in by now, and they saw my face. God damn it, I should have seen this coming. They'll come after us now – we have to get you inside."

With that, Sinclair jumps out of the car, coming quickly to my side and pulling my door open. I step out and he lifts me quickly into his arms, charging forward to the palace. There are guards waiting at the door who look at us with shock and surprise.

"Alpha," the guard says. "We weren't expecting

“Let us in,” Sinclair growls, barely stopping to let his command register and ready to burst through the door if the guard doesn’t open it in time, which, fortunately, he does. “Barricade this entrance all of the entrances – get as many guards here as you can, and let no one in except at my command. Is that clear?”

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The guard nods quickly, all business, ready to follow through on Sinclair’s commands. As soon as we’re in the dark palace, though, I open my mouth, letting out the sharp cry I’ve been holding back. This contraction – it’s horrible, sharper than the others, and fast

–

“Sinclair,” I pant, looking up at him. “The baby is coming – we have to get to a hospital –

”

He shakes his head at me, looking horribly repentant as he pounds up the wide marble stairs. I’m sorry, baby,” he says. “We can’t go anywhere until we know it’s safe.”

”

“Then what are we…” I look around, not recognizing what part of the palace we’re in now. But,

apparently, Sinclair knows where he’s going, throwing his shoulder into doors and bursting through them until, quite suddenly, we’re in a beautiful bedroom with a wide four-posted bed with blue velvet curtains hanging down from a rich canopy.

Sinclair slows now and I look around the sumptuous room in awe as he carefully places me on the bed. “Well,” he says, grimacing a little, apology still in his eyes. “A King’s bedroom is as good as any a place for Rafe to be born, don’t you think?”

“Is that where we are?” I wonder aloud, still panting as I look around, the shock of the situation allowing me to ignore my pain for just a moment.

Sinclair nods to me and then sits on the bed by my side. “Ella,” he says urgently, taking my hand. “I need to go organize those guards, make sure that you are safe, make sure that they know to let Hank and Cora in when they get here –”

“Are they even going to be able to get here?” I gasp, looking up into my mate’s eyes, seeing the hesitation and doubt there. “Cora is across town – and I don’t know where Hank is – and we don’t

have any medical supplies

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“I

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“They’ll get here,” Sinclair growls, determination in every word. “But I have to go just for a few minutes – you text Cora, tell her where to come ” Sinclair pauses now, his eyes sweeping over me. “Ella, my love, will you be all right?”

I hesitate and then nod, suddenly, knowing that he has to do it. I want him by my side – don’t

want him absent for a minute – but I know that without him to lay out his commands to the

troops, this palace could be quickly overrun.

“Go,” I say, nodding encouragingly and working hard to put a little smile on my face. “We’ll be fine.” I move my hand to my belly again, worried, suddenly, as I realize that Rafe can feel my

anxiety – an anxiety beyond that which a new mother feels when she goes into labor. My poor baby – he’s already endured so much...

—

Sinclair shakes his head and I know that he, too, feels my guilt. But he leans forward, placing a steady kiss on my forehead, and whispers “I’ll be right back. Right back, Ella.” I nod, and then he’s striding away from me, leaving me alone here in this sumptuous room.

I’m very suddenly overcome by the strangeness and the silence of it all. My contraction has ended, so I’m not currently in pain, but I feel my breathing ratchet up anyway as I look around this gigantic dark room, at the lurking shadowy corners. Was this...was this where Damon slept? Where he lived his life? Where he came with his wife, with...with Lydia?

—

Suddenly, I start to shake with the panic of it all, and thick fat tears squeeze themselves

from my eyes. God damn it – just a few hours ago I was so happy – so comfortable, so at peace with

everything –

How fast the world turns.

My hands shaking, I pull my phone from the emergency bag and begin to text my sister, letting her know that the plans have changed. Almost as soon as I send the text, though, my phone starts

to ring. I pick it up, my voice shaking.

“Hello?”

“What the hell is going on, Ella?” Cora’s voice furiously demands, “You need to get to the hospital.

Now.”

“We can’t,” I explain, my voice shuddering. “We don’t know who is out there or how many people there are – the rebels

“God damn it, Ella, I’m going to kill him,” she snarls.

“Who?” I gasp, desperate and uncomprehending.

“That mate of yours, for getting you into this.”

“It’s not his fault,” I growl, willing to defend Sinclair to the end of this.

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“Whatever,” Cora snaps. “Listen, just...hold tight until this all gets sorted out, okay? I’m sure that Sinclair will have troops there in a few minutes – a whole wave of them – and they’ll be able to clear those insurgents and get you to the hospital. Fast.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding, a little relief coming to me at the idea. But then, I start to feel the pain rising again in me. “Um, Cora?” I ask, looking down at my stomach as the ache begins to intensify and spread.

“Yeah?” she asks, impatient. I can hear her moving around, objects clattering in the background in her hurry.

“Can you come here anyway? Like, now?”

“I’ll just meet you at the hospital

—

“No, Cora,” I insist. “I need you now.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the phone, complete silence. Then, my sister speaks. “What’s going on, Ella?”

“My contractions,” I explain. “They’re only they’re four minutes apart.”

My sister curses, shocking me a little with the intensity and fluency of her expletives. I blink in

shock.

“Just stay put, Ella,” she commands. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“But how will you

”

“I’ll be there —“ she shouts, and then the phone goes blank.

I drop the phone to the bed, my lip starting to tremble with anxiety and fear and loneliness. But then I glance down at myself, fighting against the spasms of shocking pain that are spreading through my center. Because I’m not alone, am I?

Rafe is here. And I need to start concentrating on him.

—

So, I take control – or at least, as much of it as I can. I stand up, ignoring everything in my situation except my baby and my body’s own needs. I peel back the covers of the bed, revealing the clean sheets beneath, and I climb in, stacking pillows behind me to support me as I sit against

them and start to breathe through the contraction. I close my eyes and concentrate on the bond between me and my child.

Just me and you, kid, I tell him, wiping my fear away as best I can and sending him a burst of love. I’ve got you. We can do this.

And my heart fills with courage as he sends me a little pulse back: belief.

Rafe trusts me. And it's all I need.

It's time to bring my baby into the world, and I'm ready. I was born for this.

Chapter 290 – Contractions

Ella

Slowly, I breathe through my contractions, taking deep breaths in through my nose and huffing them out of my mouth. The pain is...well, I suppose I can't say like anything I've felt before, can I? Not after all I've been through in the past five months. But it's incredible, the way it radiates through my body, making me grit my teeth against it.

I can feel my body moving, changing along with the contractions. The pain in my pelvis, particularly, is insane, as the bones shift to make room for the baby to pass through. My eyes flash open during one particularly difficult contraction and I hear myself cry out against the pain. God, I would have thought that being a wolf made this easier – wolves seem to have a whole litter of pups without much trouble, by themselves out in the woods.

Passingly, I consider shifting into my wolf form to ease this

–

But then, suddenly, Sinclair bursts into my room, dashing for me.

"What," he gasps, almost skidding to the side, looking me all over for what is wrong. "What is it, Ella – I heard you scream –"

"No," I say, gasping a little as the contraction starts to come to its end. "No, it's just the contraction – god, Dominic, these suck –"

He shakes his head, still panicked, trying to put it all together as he kneels by the side of the bed and takes my hand. "Cora is coming, she's close," he murmurs. "She'll be allowed in."

"And Hank?" I ask, looking at my mate. "And Roger?"

"Roger?" Sinclair asks, confused.

"Yes, Dominic! Roger! I want him here as well!"

"Why?" Sinclair's eyes are wide with wonder now.

"Because!" I smack his shoulder, frowning at him. "He's the child's uncle! And his godfather! He should be here! I can't believe you didn't call him!"

"Ella," Sinclair sighs, reaching for the cell phone in his back pocket as I lean back on into the pillows, taking deep breaths. "I can't believe you're thinking about propriety while

you're giving birth with insurgents outside

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"This is going to be as perfect as I can make it for Rafe!" I snap, determined. "And if I have to give birth in a war zone with no epidural, then Roger can damn well get out of bed and come over here to greet his nephew!"

"Oookay..." Sinclair says softly, giving in without any further questions. I hear him tapping on his phone and then he shifts. I watch him stand, leaning over me. Frowning, he leans over and

grabs one of the pillows from the other side of the bed, quickly taking the pillowcase between his two hands and ripping off a long strip,

C

"You know you don't need to do the linens thing and boil water that's just in the movies. I'm sure Cora will bring something else to sterilize any instruments she brings—"

"It's not for that," he murmurs, leaning down and wiping the sweat from my brow with the little square of pillowcase folded in his hand. "How are you, love? How do you feel?"

I relax back as much as I can against the pillows, the next contraction not starting yet. "I feel... determined," I say, gazing up at him. "Rafe is ready. He told me so. We're both ready."

"That's my girl," Sinclair says softly, taking my chin between the fingers of his big hand and gazing at me. "So strong."

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I nod at him, willing myself to believe it too — that I'm strong even though I'm scared and in pain. I am strong. For him, and for Rafe, and yes — for myself — I can be strong.

—

"Ooooh," I say, pressing my eyes shut again, my hands moving low on my stomach. "Here comes another one." >>

Sinclair gets on his knees by my side again, steady and tense. Then, as I start to breathe in that special way Cora made me practice, he breathes along with me. He's

there with me, every step.

Time passes quickly this way, with long stretches of pain followed up by a few minutes of respite. Unfortunately, those minutes are coming closer and closer together. I'm moving through this birth process fast, and I don't have any control over it. If I could wait, just hold him in while we wait for Cora to get here...

But no, it seems like Rafe and my body have other plans.

Sinclair talks softly to me throughout the process, helping me get ready in the moments between contractions. He helps me change into a cotton nightgown instead of the travel clothes I was wearing on the way here. He brings me two cool cups of water, one for drinking, the other for dipping more strips of pillowcase in to lay across my hot forehead. Throughout it all, my mate is all attention and support.

But beneath that, I can see on his face the worry and guilt that he's done something horrible in not getting me to the hospital. I hold his gaze steadily whenever I can, letting him know, silently, that we're all going to be all right. We're going to make it.

I don't know how much time has passed when the door bursts open. Cora flies into the room, panting, a medical bag slung over her shoulder. I almost spill the glass of tap water Sinclair just handed me all over myself as I give a little shriek of surprise when she bursts in.

"Ella," she gasps, dashing over to me, almost bowling Sinclair over in her singular focus to be at my side, to look me over and assess my condition.

"Steady," Sinclair murmurs, a little frustrated, as he puts out a hand to balance himself so that he doesn't go sprawling on the floor. Cora ignores him.

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"Ella, love," she murmurs, her eyes sweeping over me. "Tell me what's going on

I need to know." She puts a hand on my stomach, feeling for the baby. "He's low..." she murmurs as I fill her in on the timing of my contractions – three minutes apart now – and the aches and pains.

survey of my

"Everything sounds normal, Ella," she says calmly, looking at me in the eye so that I can see her faith. I hear Sinclair give a great sigh of relief, but I keep my eyes on my sister. She breaks my gaze, though, and starts peeling back the sheets. "I need to take a look. Can you lay back all the way?"

I do as she says, clearing the pillows so that I can lay flat on the bed and allowing my sister to examine me. As she does, I look up at Sinclair, who takes my hand.

“Well,” Cora says quietly after a few minutes. “I don’t have all of the tools I would like to make a full assessment, but,” she sits up and looks me in the eyes, giving me a big grin. “Ella, you’ve moved through this remarkably fast. From what I see, you’re ten inches dilated and ready to start pushing.”

Her grin broadens. “Are you ready to have this baby, sis?” Cora asks, reaching forward to take my other hand.

“Really?” I gasp, my eyes going wide. I look between my sister and my mate. “No way – it’s too soon. “It’s time,” she says, “believe it or not, but it’s time.”

“But,” I struggle to sit up and Sinclair offers a helping hand. “Hank isn’t here yet – neither is Roger. “Roger,” Cora snaps, frowning at me a little. “Why is he coming?”

“What is with you two,” I ask, baffled, looking between my mate and my sister. “Why is everyone so shocked that I want the baby’s uncle to be here when he’s born?”

“We just didn’t think of it, love,” Sinclair responds, brushing the damp hair away from my forehead. “Our concentration is on you.”

I open my mouth to respond but a sudden surge of pain hits me and I groan, turning my attention back to my belly, my core, where I can feel my child pressed low against me. “Ooohhhh,” I say, hunching my shoulders forward. “Oh, it’s a big one.”

“They’re all going to be big now,” Cora says, perhaps a little too cheerfully. “Come on, Ella. It’s time to push.”

Chapter 291 – Big Alpha Baby

Ella

I'm gripping my sister's hand, gritting my teeth and groaning through the first of my pushes, when the door bangs open again. I don't open my eyes – can't look –

Quite frankly, at this particular moment I don't care who the hell it is if it's Hank, or Roger, or insurgents coming to kill us – all I care about is the horrible, tearing pain within me as I work to bring my baby into the world.

I moan, throwing my head back against the pillows as I pant, feeling the pain subside a little bit.

"How is she?" I hear Hank ask, and I open my eyes to see him there next to me. I try to give him a little smile, failing a bit. "Hello, Ella," he says softly, his voice warmer than I'm used to. "You look like you're doing great."

I murmur my thanks to him as he turns his attention back to Cora, getting a full report, and I shift my gaze to Roger, who stands awkwardly across the room.

"Roger," I say, putting my hand out to him, inviting him closer. "Hello, Ella!" he calls, awkward. "Happy...happy birth. Or whatever."

Sinclair starts to laugh quietly. "Come over, Roger," he demands and Roger sighs, hanging his head and deliberately choosing not to look at me as he comes to stand with his brother. "What," Sinclair asks him as he arrives at his side. "More of a cigars in the waiting room kind of guy?"

"Yeah," Roger agrees, giving his brother a little glare. "I'd say that's much more my vibe." "I wanted you here," I say to him, giving him a tired little smile. "I want you to meet the baby."

"Of course I want to meet the baby, Ella," Roger says, his voice kinder now as he meets my gaze. "Just...when you've cleaned it up a bit. Gotten some of the goop off."

I laugh, a little, but groan when I feel the pain start to return. Cora climbs up onto the bed for this one, cursing a little at the lack of stirrups and the soft surface of the mattress that makes it harder for her to see what's really going on. Roger tries to muffle his groan as he turns away, which perversely makes me want to laugh in one of the more painful and trying moments of my life.

Hank quickly takes Cora's space at my side, Sinclair solid a solid force next to my head. "You've moved quite quickly through this, Ella," Hank informs me as the contraction ends and I pant, working to catch my breath. "This is rare, even for a wolf birth. But you

should be in the final parts of it now," he says, patting my knee and giving me an encouraging smile.

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I smile back at him but note, interestingly, that Cora rolls her eyes at him a little bit when he says this. I have no idea what that could mean is there trouble in paradise? – but honestly, any of my interest in that question is immediately wiped out when the pain comes again.

This continues for a few rounds, of me huffing and pushing with all of my might during the contractions and then resting, as best I can, in the short spaces between them. I can feel my baby moving inside me, progressing along. It's hard, agonizing work, but my sister calls encouragement to me and my mate is by my side through every moment of it, steadily holding me together.

After what feels like an endless repetition of this pattern, Cora gives a little gasp. "Okay, he's almost here!" she says, and the cheer in her voice is a balm to my agonized body. I look at her with hope in my eyes and she gives me a happy little nod. "One big push, sis, and his head will be born, and then it's easy after that!"

I take a deep breath, looking up excitedly at Sinclair, happy despite the pain ravaging my body. I wait for the next contraction and, when it comes and Cora tells me to, I push – absolutely as hard as I can, giving a guttural yell while I do in that I hope will help me push through, bring him home.

"Oh, his little head!" Cora says, smiling at me, "he's here, Ella! Just a couple more to bring forward his body next!"

I nod, eager, and begin to push again. And push, and push. I gasp, laying back and panting as I feel the contraction end, and I look to Cora for instructions. Instead of a happy smile, though, I see her exchange an odd little glance with Hank.

"What," I demand, working to sit up and moaning at the pain that shoots through my back. "What's wrong? Where's my baby?"

"Is something wrong?" Sinclair asks, suddenly tense next to me. I can tell by his voice that he's working, so hard, to stay still and steady, to let the doctor's do their work. Inaction and the passing of responsibility to another – no matter how much they outstrip him in their expertise – has never been his strong suit. My mate wants to be involved.

"Um," Cora hesitates, "it's okay, Ella – he's almost born – but..." She and Hank hesitate and exchange glances again, then looking down at the baby. I struggle to sit up, to see the child, but my sister shakes her head at me, leaning forward to press me back to the

pillows.

“Please,” I beg, my eyes fixed on Sinclair. “Please, you have to tell us. Cora sighs as she sits back and I see that her face is worried. “Ella, he didn’t make any progress in the past few pushes. Which is sometimes a sign that...”

“There is some worry,” Hank continues, “that because he’s such a large baby, that he could be ...stuck.”

“Stuck?” I gasp, suddenly horrified. Sinclair goes rigid next to me. “It’s common,” Hank says hurriedly. “Lots of women experience this with large babies. It’s called shoulder dystocia – we think his shoulder is trapped up behind your pelvis.”

“What?” I gasp, confused, baffled, horribly worried. “What do we –”

“It’s okay!” Cora says, though her worried voice belies her words. “We’re trained for this.

Then, my sister moves across the bed until she’s next to my head. She puts a steady hand under my shoulder, pulling upwards. “Come on, Ella, you need to change your position before the next contraction comes – I’m going to move you on your side to shift your pelvis, and then – ”

–

“Don’t tell me “I gasp, moving with her. “Just do it.” I look up into Sinclair’s worried eyes, knowing mine are a mirror for his. I nod to him, letting him know that it’s okay, and praying – deep inside me – that it’s true. I send a little pulse of love to baby Rafe, but he doesn’t send anything back. He is, predictably, distracted.

I moan in pain as Cora shifts me onto my side and then begins to press on my stomach just above my pelvis when the next contraction starts.

“Good, Ella, keep going...” I hear Hank murmur as I pant and push and shout at the pain of it. And then, a few moments later, “No progress, Cora – I’m going to cut

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“All right,” I hear Cora say, her voice shaky, though my eyes are pressed shut.

I hear a roar from Sinclair at the same moment that I feel the cold press of metal against me. His hand rips from mine, but I don’t know where he goes, and the metal slices further down by the child, eliciting a slow and guttural scream from my throat.

But then, suddenly, there is a lack of pressure low on my body where there wasn’t

before and I feel my shoulders collapse and the sudden lack of need to push. I'm still wracked with agonizing pain but I blink and work to sit up as I hear the cry of a baby fill the room.

Rafe.

Rafe is here. I gasp, looking for him, seeing a little form in Hank's bloody hands. I reach for him but feel quite suddenly woozy and, before I can hold my child, I collapse back against my pillows.

Hi. Dear readers

Thank you for your support and love for Accidental Surrogate. Book 1 of the story has ended at Chapter 291. But because of your enthusiasm and anticipation, we wanted to present you new stories after Rafe's birth.

According to the suggestion of the platform editor, the content of book 2 will be updated in this one, so you can continue reading

Chapter 292 – A Gift

Sinclair

Agony.

It's agony for me – obviously, more for my mate, I'm sure – but watching her survive this is ripping me apart.

I struggle against Roger's grip – he shouldn't be stronger than me, he's never stronger than me, I should be able to break away – but something about all of this has just taken it out of me. I am weak, now, watching my mate struggle for her life, watching my son take his first breaths, that rips the energy from me. I gasp for breath, panicked, looking between my Ella and the baby in the doctor's hands.

"Relax," Roger commands, his voice low behind me as he holds me back with a hand on each of my arms. "Let them work. You can't do anything right now. They'll call you when they need you."

I know he's right, but the impulse – I have to do something –

Still, I stand with my brother, letting him take control as I watch Hank and Cora moving, blessing them in my mind with every breath that pants from my lips. Ella lays back against the pillows, pale, breathing faintly, apparently half conscious and half out.

The pair of doctors move fast. Hank glances over the crying child and then quickly hands him to Cora, reaching for the medical bag that sits on the bed between them. Cora does a quick inspection of the baby and then hastily cuts the umbilical cord. Then, she meets my eyes.

"Come and take your child, Dominic," she demands, wrapping him hastily in the scrap of a pillowcase that I tore to pieces not long ago. "He's fine – but Ella needs both Hank and I right now." Roger releases my arms and I move forward, my eyes half on my beautiful Ella as I take the baby from Cora's hands. I can't – how can I greet my son when his mother –

"The child," Cora says, holding my gaze for a brief moment before turning back to Ella. "Concentrate on the baby, Sinclair. We've got Ella for now."

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And so I do. I look down at my infant son, crying his lusty little heart out, waving his little tiny fists in the air. Something in me takes over something I'm not sure I knew was there – as I begin to shush my child, to rock him, to try to bring him to a peaceful state in this scary new world. Slowly, softly, I raise my hand to wipe at the liquid on his face, to clear

it, marveling at the fact that his entire head is completely dwarfed by the size of my palm

And then, following an impulse that's totally new to me, I lean forward and bring my face close to my sons, pressing a kiss to his head and taking a deep breath of his new baby scent, totally new and, somehow, already totally his own. "Welcome, baby," I murmur.

From the corners of my vision I can see Cora and Hank working swiftly with their medical supplies, Hank sewing quickly while Cora crouches by Ella's head, taking her pulse and smacking

her cheeks a little.

When I hear Cora call Ella's name, my attention snaps away from Rafe and to the sisters on the bed. "Ella," Cora says, and I see my mate – oh, thank god – I see her blink, and focus on her sister, her

face ashen and white. Unbidden, I come to Ella's side, determined to be with her – to give her everything I can.

Cora ignores me as I take my mate's hand, the baby curled in the curve of my other arm.

"Ella," Cora demands, steady. "It's time to access the gift. You need it. Ask her to heal you."

Slowly, Ella nods her head and closes her eyes. But I don't know if that's because....because she's accessing the gift? Or something else...

Something much much worse. I open my mouth, panicked, to call her name, but Cora snaps her attention to me and shakes her head.

And so I close my mouth, and squeeze my mate's hand, and let her do her work.

Ella

–

It's terribly hard to do anything right now to think, to concentrate, to communicate – let alone enter the calm meditative state I need to access my mother's gift.

My body is wracked with pain, and I don't know whether it's blood loss from Hank's medical cut, or some sort of tear within me, or...something else. But my vision fades in and out from a hazy view of the palace bedroom and utter blackness.

But still, in the brief moments when I can concentrate, I see Sinclair standing by my side,

feel his hand in my own, and see our little baby wrapped up in a sheet in his arm –

Just as he was in the dream state And I find new determination within me. So, working hard to steady my breathing, to not slip into oblivion, I close my eyes and work to access that state.

It's harder than it's ever been but, eventually, I get there. I watch the insides of my eyelids fade from black and red to that cool lavender, and I feel the balm of my mother's gift begin to wash over me from the inside. Passively, I wonder what my family is seeing –

I wonder if I'm glowing, as Cora was, that day by the temple steps.

Or if, perhaps, they can't see anything at all – if the gift is working inside me, and they're just holding their breaths, hoping that I'm not...I'm not slipping away...

I feel it take hold of me, though, like a mother's welcoming arms. I feel cradled within its warmth, and can almost hear her – the Goddess, my mother whispering to me that she will make it right.

– That for all I've given the world, I have earned this, and that she will make it right.

The magic runs slowly through me like rainwater through grass, seeking the roots of me, wanting to refresh but taking its time getting there. But as it seeps through every inch of me, I feel slowly renewed. I feel an ease return to me.

When I open my eyes, everyone is standing around me, staring at me, their faces shocked. I take a deep breath and look around at the four of them. But I ignore them all, focusing only on the bundle of white blankets resting on my mate's arm. The little baby. Who is not crying.

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"Rafe," I cry, working hard to sit up, a little rill of pain shooting through me. I grimace at it – apparently, whatever the goddess' gift did, it didn't fix me completely – but mostly I ignore it,

reaching for my son.

"It's all right, Ella," Sinclair says, quickly kneeling by my side and offering my son to me. Tears slip down my cheeks and I'm surprised to find that I'm suddenly sobbing as I take my baby into my arms for the first time. As I lay my eyes on my child's face.

"Baby," I whisper-cry, my chest heaving as relief floods through me to see that he is

fussy and unhappy, but not sad, not hurt – just...adjusting to his new world. He flinches angrily as my tears fall onto his perfect little face, making me laugh. “Sorry, baby,” I murmur, brushing them away. Sorry about that. Mama’s not always like this.”

–

“It’s all right, Ella,” Sinclair whispers quietly behind me. “He’s safe – you’re safe a few tears on his face are not the worst part of his day –”

“Poor little baby,” I sob, a smile breaking out on my face even as I cry, my whole body a mix of emotions happiness, and guilt, and worry, and joy – all mixing together so that I don’t know who or how I am anymore.

Except, I know that I’m a mother. I’m his mother. That, finally, I know is true. “Let’s give them a minute,” Roger whispers. “Would that be all right?”

I hear Hank murmur his medical assent and look up, suddenly, to see the three of them moving away Cora climbing off the bed and beaming at me.

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“We’ll be back soon,” she whispers to me. “You’re fine, Ella – the gift did its work. You just...take a minute. Say hello to your child.”

I nod, smiling back at her and wiping away my tears. And then, the three of them troop out of the room together. And I’m left alone, with my perfect little family. My mate, my son, and me. Complete.

Chapter 293 – First Night

Ella

As they close the door I look up at Sinclair and smile. I don't have any words, but the expression on his face lets me know that he feels exactly the same. Warm, and happy, and a little panicked that we now have to take care of this little person, but thrilled. Absolutely thrilled to be here, with him.

"You were magnificent, Ella," Sinclair murmurs, tilting my chin up with his finger as he climbs into the bed with me, ignoring the fact that it's kind of...well. That these sheets will have to be destroyed, to say the least. But Sinclair, I know, doesn't care. He just wants to be near me, near us.

"He's magnificent," I say, turning my attention to my baby and leaning forward to press a kiss to his head. I laugh when I see him squirm. "God, I didn't know he'd be so mad. What an angry little guy!" I say, running a finger down his perfectly-soft little cheek as he mewls and gives little cries.

"Go easy on him," Sinclair remarks, a little bit of a joke in his voice. It does me good to hear it. "He's had a hard day."

"You had a hard day," I say to the baby, rolling my eyes at him. "Kid, don't forget who you're talking to here."

Sinclair laughs lightly and kisses my head, beaming down at our child.

A sudden impulse overtakes me then, and I follow it without really thinking very hard. "Here," I say, quickly handing Sinclair the baby and sitting up straight. He frowns at me, confused, as I pull my ruined white nightgown over my head and toss it to the floor. Then, naked, I reach for the baby

again.

Sinclair nods in understanding, handing me the baby. I quickly unwrap him from his makeshift swaddling and press his warm little body against my chest, sighing in relief as I tuck his little

head beneath my chin. Then, I close my eyes, feeling relief flood me at the feeling of my little boy's body again close to mine.

I feel Sinclair pull blankets up around us so that we're both warm, and then he folds his arms around us as well, making a neat little cocoon so that we can say hello to our baby.

"Hi, Rafe," I say, smiling as I say his name to him, loving the feel of it on my tongue. "It's

nice to

finally get to see you. Hold you in my arms. I have been waiting...a long time for this.”

Tears start to seep down my cheeks again now, but my emotions pull together a bit. Warmth, happiness, completion. All the good things I've wanted for a long, long time.

We stay like that – still like that, and mostly silent – for I don't know how long. But a great peace fills me, and I can feel through our bond – that Rafe and Sinclair feel the same.

Well, Sinclair mostly. Rafe is still figuring it out and crying, like babies do. But at the root of him, I can feel that he knows he's safe. A little while later, I hear the door creek open and I look to it to see Cora peeking in.

“Can I come in?” she asks quietly. “Can I meet the baby?”

I laugh, sitting up a little, beckoning her forward. “What do you mean – you met him first!” I call, smiling happily at her. Sinclair stands up, heading to the hospital bag that we packed and brought with us. As Cora comes to the bed to take the baby, he hands her a little baby blanket with an R embroidered on it, and then he hands me a simple t-shirt so, you know, I'm not topless when I'm hanging out with my sister.

I shoot my mate a little grin, thankful. He nods like it's the least he can do. As I pull the shirt over my head I watch my sister with her nephew, cooing to him and admiring him, bouncing him a little as she walks with him around the room.

“He's beautiful, Ella,” she says to me, giving me a warm smile. I open my mouth to confirm her observations when the door opens again, Hank and Roger coming into the room. Hank strides over to us, confident, though Roger hesitates a little, looking a little shocked after the night's events. I laugh when I see him, beckoning him to come closer into the room.

“Ella,” Hank says, beaming down at me. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Hank!” I reply, smiling up at him.

“Do you want to get cleaned up?” he asks, all business, gesturing towards the bathroom across the way. “If so, Cora and I can strip these sheets, see what we can do about the mattress before you get -back –”

Realizing that this is probably good advice, I start to sit up, but then I look at the baby again.” Shouldn't I wait? Isn't he hungry?”

“He can wait a few more minutes, Ella,” Cora smiles at me. “Take a moment for

yourself.”

I work to stand up, grateful to my mother’s gift which probably makes this more possible than it should be, even though I still feel a great deal of pain in the lower half of my body. Still, I wrap some blankets around my waist as I stand and grab the overnight hospital bag, feeling oddly demure about my naked body. I laugh at the ridiculousness of it, considering what these people have seen in the past few hours, but I just shrug and make my way to the bathroom anyway, the blankets following me like a train.

I’m not going to question any of it. I can’t care.

As I go, I see Cora move to hand the baby to Roger so that she can help Hank. Roger puts up his hands in fearful protest, saying something about not knowing how to hold a baby, but she just laughs up into his face and presses the baby into his arms. I smile as I disappear into the bathroom, seeing a little of their old relationship glowing between them at the moment.

As I close the door, I wonder if maybe...

But no. That’s a question for another time. Today is about Rafe.

I rush through my ablutions, eager to get back to my baby, and am surprised at the transformation made in the bedroom when I return to it. The bed looks almost fresh, with clean sheets and new pillows.

“Wow,” I say, making my way to the other side of the bed dressed in a tshirt and pajama pants. Sinclair is there already, turning down the blankets for me. “Looks almost luxurious in here. No one would guess what a horror show it was an hour ago.”

My mate smiles at me and gestures to the bed as Roger comes over, eagerly handing me my child.

“He’s beautiful, Ella,” Roger says, giving me a warm kiss on the cheek before I sit down on the bed. “Thank you for thinking to invite me. I know it was you that remembered, not Dominic.”

I laugh, but don’t deny it, Sinclair looking rueful beside me.

Then, Hank comes over, looking down at the baby and then giving me a smile. “Cora and I discussed some plans while you were cleaning up. We think that, given the disruption tonight, it might be best for you and Sinclair to stay here in the palace. And then, tomorrow, when you’ve rested a bit, we’ll take you in an ambulance over to the hospital to make sure that everything is fine.”

He smiles down at my fussy baby, then, before continuing. "Of course, I don't anticipate any trouble, especially after the use of the Goddess' gift. But it's always good to be safe."

"Yes," Cora says, coming to stand next to me. "Hanks going to stay in the room next door, if you're all right with it, in case anything happens. I'll stay for a few minutes to make sure you're getting started with the feeding, and then I'll go sleep in my own bed."

I nod, agreeing to the plan.

Chapter 294 – Godparents

Ella

“And I am leaving immediately,” Roger adds in, making us all laugh. “Seriously,” he says, “I’m useless until the kid is old enough to throw a ball. Then, it’s all Uncle Roger.” (2

I smile at him, pleased, and take his hand to squeeze it, letting him know how glad I am that he came. His eyes soften as he looks at me, and I know he feels the same.

“All right,” I say, sighing and climbing into the bed. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Then, everyone goes to their work, Roger and Hank leaving the room and Cora sitting next to me to help me through the first steps of breastfeeding. Sinclair sits close by, clearly interested, but not interfering as Cora shows me how to help the baby latch. I feel a whole new rush of emotion as I feel him begin to suck, as I feel the milk start to flow and feed my baby.

“There,” Cora says softly, and I look at her with tears in my eyes. “See? You’re a natural.”

“Where should he sleep?” I ask, looking around, suddenly desperate. We don’t have a basinet, of

course.

Cora just shrugs. “You’ll figure it out. Use your mom instincts. People were having babies for thousands of years before hospitals came to answer these questions for them about how to have their first night.” She grins a little wickedly at Sinclair and me. “I don’t think you two are going to get much sleep anyway, but...you’ll figure it out.”

I laugh a little and return my gaze to my baby, whose eyes are closed as I hold him warm against my chest. “That’s right, baby,” I whisper. “We’re going to figure it out.”

“Okay,” my sister says, standing and giving me a kiss on the forehead. “You’re a marvel, Ella,” she whispers. “Call me if you need anything. I’ll see you at the hospital tomorrow.”

I nod, but don’t look at her, instead staring at my son. My new baby, this much- and long-desired

child who is finally, finally here.

I feel the weight of Sinclair’s body on the bed next to me as the door clicks shut behind Cora, but I don’t take my eyes away from Rafe as Sinclair wraps his arms around me.

“Well,” Sinclair sighs, pressing a kiss to my hair. “This is the start of a whole new era. Are you

ready for it?”

“Oh,” I say, turning my head to grin up at my mate, eager. “I’m ready for it. I’ve been waiting for this my whole life.”

Cora

I’m exhausted as I push through the doors of the palace but I also feel oddly...complete. It’s more than the general happiness I feel after one of my patients safely delivers a healthy child. Of course, that’s normal, I think, considering that it’s my sister.

But still, there’s something...else in the air. More than just a job well done. I reflect, suddenly, that maybe it’s the knowledge that I have a new little nephew now, to raise and to help discover the world. There’s something wonderful in that.

1/3

I make eye contact with one of the guards standing at the bottom of the steps, wanting to make sure that it’s safe to leave, and begin to take a step when he waves me forward. However, I jump when I hear the voice behind me.

“So,” it says. And I know without turning who it belongs to. I turn, meeting Roger’s eyes. “I hear we’re going to be godparents together.”

“Oh?” I ask, watching him as he walks slowly over to me, his hands sunk deep in his pockets.” Well, that’s not much of a surprise. The two lone siblings of the father and the mother.”

“Yes,” he says, coming to stand close to me. Close enough that I can almost feel his words as breath on my cheek, as well as hear them. “But only one of us is the daughter of a deity. I think Rafe is making out better on his mother’s side.”

I can’t help the little laugh that spills out of me at that, and I look down at my feet. “Well,” I say, a little awkward. I haven’t talked to Roger in weeks, let alone this casually. “I suppose that’s up for debate, considering I’m a human amongst the wolves.”

“Cora,” Roger says, hesitating, and I see his hand reaching for mine. I flinch away.

“What?” I ask, suddenly mad. “What are you even doing here? Weren’t you so eager to get home?”

Roger hesitates and then pulls his hand back, perhaps wanting to pretend like he never reached but for mine. He gives a casual little shrug, looking out at the newly-quiet city. "The troops quelled the riots, but that doesn't mean that everyone went home and no one's lurking in the dark wanting to make mischief." He looks at me then, pausing before he continues. "I wanted to make sure you got home safe."

"Well, I'm fine," I snap, turning away from him and heading down the steps to where my car is parked. "Thanks for the thought, but I'm fine."

"Cora," he calls after me, his voice full of regret.

"What!" I snap again, turning to glare at him. "What, Roger! I don't need you to protect me! I don't need this!"

"You don't need what?" he asks, challenging me. "You don't need help getting home? Or you don't need me?"

"God damn it, Roger," I growl, almost through my teeth, shaking my head at him. "Seriously? Now? You want to dig into this now, after months of silence on the subject?"

"What subject, Cora?" he asks, his voice angry now. "The absolute nothing that is us?"

I open my mouth to throw his words back at him, but he's too quick for me.

"And even if I wanted to," Roger pushes, "how could I? You're always with him."

0

"Oh?" I ask, sarcastic, my eyes going wide. "Is that the great barrier? Have you never heard of this thing called a phone?"

"You wanted to have this conversation over a phone, Cora?" Roger asks, closing the distance between us, his voice hurt now as well as mad. "That's all you think it deserves?"

"What conversation?" I hiss. "Like you said. It's the nothing that is us. There's nothing to say." I grit my teeth and turn then, heading back down the stairs, fast and mad, wanting to get away

from him. Certainly not wanting him to see the new dampness on my lower lashes.

"You killed this, Cora," Roger shouts after me, apparently not caring who hears. "You did this. Not me."

Anger flares in me now, so intensely that I halt in my steps. Then, acting on rage more than logic, I spin and throw myself back up the stairs towards him, stopping when I'm so close to him that a single breath would heave my chest against his.

Then, I raise a single hand, place my splayed fingers against his chest, and push.

He stumbles back, I think more out of surprise than any real strength in me. He's a wolf, anyway. And I'm just a human.

"F*ck you, Roger," I whisper, knowing that he can hear me. "You did this. I was in. And you stopped calling me." (2)

"I was busy –" he protests, "trying to fix the nation

I laugh, shaking my head and turning away from him. "Whatever excuse you want to make," I call over my shoulder, still angry but doing a better job now, I think, of hiding it and playing it cool." But don't blame me just because I didn't wait around for you after you ghosted me."

"Cora!" Roger calls, and, well, even if there is pain in his voice I don't care anymore. Or at least, I walk away like I don't.

I give him a finger over my shoulder and call, more casually than I feel, "I'll see you at the christening."

I roll my eyes when I hear his retort.

"Werewolves don't have christenings!"

"Whatever!" I respond, pulling open the driver's door to my car and sitting down heavily in my seat. I don't look in my rearview mirror as I drive away.

I don't want to know if he watches me leave. Don't want to see the expression on his face.

Because if I see that he's as devastated by this conversation as I am, then...

And I am determined. Determined not to go back.

Chapter 295 – Morning in the Palace

Ella I groan when I wake up, but I don't open my eyes. Not yet. I feel like I just closed them ten minutes ago anyway – my poor eyeballs need more rest.

Instead, I take a moment to feel my body from the inside out, to check in with myself and see what hurts, what feels good. I'm surprised to find that I can feel remnants of my mother's gift running through me – what feels like little sparkling tendrils of sunlight, working through my limbs, perhaps healing me. I smile to think of it, smile to think of my mother giving me something that lasts after so many years of her absence.

She is a mother goddess, after all the mother to us all, not just me. But still, as my actual mother, it feels nice to finally have...a piece of her.

I hear my little baby give a little cry and my eyes fly open, searching for him. I sit up in bed, a hand going to my head, and look blearily around..My eyes are drawn instantly – unsurprisingly – to the huge werewolf standing across the room, bouncing a little bundle of blankets in his arm. I smile at my mate's turned back and quickly climb out of bed, moving towards him.

Sinclair hears me coming and quietly turns, our little boy still fussing a little in his arms.

"Has he been like this long?" I ask, yawning, reaching for my child. Sinclair transfers him into my arms and I feel a quick rushing thrill at the feel of my baby returned to me.

"No," Sinclair replies with a smile. "He's been sleeping well – he just started crying now. Do you think he's hungry?"

I shrug and look up at him. "Probably. I know I am."

Together we carry Rafe back to the bed and I climb in, rearranging my top so that Rafe can try to eat. Sinclair quietly watches as I work and I let out a little sigh of relief when Rafe quickly latches and begins to suck. I watch him for a moment, instinctually doing a little check on our bond and receiving a little push of happiness and satisfaction back from him.

Suddenly, I begin to wonder something.

"Do you still have a bond with him?" I ask Sinclair, my eyes going wide.

He nods easily, his eyes still on the child.

"Do you still have one with your father?" I press further, curious. This brings his eyes up to me, frowning.

“Thave....a bond with my father, certainly,” Sinclair responds. “But no – as you grow, the bond between parents and their children fades a bit. Once a child is able to speak and communicate their needs on their own, it’s not necessary anymore.”

My heart breaks a little bit at this news and Sinclair clicks his tongue and reaches out a hand to cup my cheek when he sees tears fill my eyes.

“I don’t want to lose my bond with my child,” I say, my voice trembling. “I can’t bear the thought of that

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“You won’t” my mate assures me, shaking his head. “It just...changes. You and Rafe will always be tied, just in different ways. Besides, when he grows up and meets his own mate, do you really want to be feeling what he’s feeling?” Sinclair raises his eyebrow at me and gives me a smirk.

I narrow my eyes at Sinclair and then down at my little baby. “No mates for you, Rafe,” I scold. You’re mama’s boy, forever. I’m keeping you.’

Sinclair laughs. “You’ll feel differently when he’s a big hulking teenage wolf stinking up your house.”

”

“No,” I murmur, leaning down to kiss my baby’s head. “I’m going to raise him to be a nice clean nerd, so no one likes him, and I get to keep him. No one will be good enough for him anyway.” “All right,” Sinclair murmurs, shifting his position on the bed and coming to lay next to me, closing his eyes. “Whatever you say, trouble.” I smile at him, watching him drift off to sleep as the sunlight starts to brighten at the edges of the curtains. I suspect that he stayed up all night, rocking the baby in his arms, in order to let me sleep. So it’s the least I can do now to let him have his own rest.

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Rafe falls asleep again soon after he finishes, and my baby pressed warm against my chest – I begin to drift off into a little half-daze as well. About an hour later, though, a little knock comes at the door, waking me. I hesitate and stand, not knowing what to expect, but as I move towards the door I see it creak open a little crack, someone peeking in.

“Oh, Dr. Hank!” I whisper, cheerful, stopping in the middle of the room and waving him

forward. Come in!"

He does, giving me a warm smile, and glancing at Sinclair asleep in the bed. "How are you, Ella?" he asks, curious. He comes and looks down at the baby, reaching out a finger to stroke his cheek.

"We're doing well, I think." I reply, heaving a big yawn. "He's been surprisingly peaceful. Is that... normal?"

"It's not abnormal," Hank says with a little shrug. "Perhaps just lucky. The ambulance is outside waiting – are you ready to go to the hospital for your checkup?"

I nod, eager, suddenly feeling more awake. After a quick discussion, I agree to meet Hank at the palace entrance in a few minutes, after I wake Sinclair. He nods and goes out to let the guards and paramedics know the plan. Then, I move over to the wolf sleeping in the King's bed.

"Dominic," I whisper, running a hand lightly through his hair. "Wake up. Time to go."

"No," he murmurs, rolling over with a groan. "I'm going to be the king anyway. This is my bed. I'll just...stay here, until the coronation."

I laugh, and then look around, a little surprised that I hadn't thought of that myself. I knew, of course, that these were the royal chambers, but all I really thought about was that they were the dead Prince's bedrooms...not that they could one day be my own. As I look around, I find that I have mixed feelings about the prospect. While I like the idea of always having access to the room where my son was born...

The idea of living here, in this place? Where there was so much violence?

Of being the queen of a world torn apart?

2/3

Of raising my son, and hopefully my future children, in that world?

I bite my lip, suddenly anxious about it.

"Hey," Sinclair says, and I feel him reach up to softly brush my arm. "All right?"

"Yes," I say, smiling down at him, Rafe's warm little body pressed against me. "Just...mom worries. I think I'll be having a lot of those, for the rest of my life."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Sinclair murmurs, standing up from the bed and

coming close to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me close against his chest. "We're going to get it all sorted, Ella," he whispers, kissing the top of my head.

I close my eyes, giving a little sigh, believing him but...knowing that that promise is going to be a hard fill.

Chapter 296 – First Checkup

Ella

When we climb out of the ambulance, it seems like a whole team of doctors are waiting for us. I smile at them, a little anxious, as they come forward to escort us into the hospital and run us through our battery of checks. At my side I feel Sinclair shift into his Alpha protection mode, looking at everyone warily, glaring at anyone who comes even close to me and the baby.

I smirk when I notice it, glancing up at his stern and dangerous expression, but I don't dissuade him. Honestly, I kind of like it.

We are escorted quickly into a private room where Hank quickly consults with a panel of experts, clearly ordering a ton of tests. As he works, a smile breaks onto my face as I see Cora turn the corner.

"Cora!" I call, waving to her, Rafe fussing in my arms. Sinclair even glares at Cora as she approaches, though she gives him a curious little look that makes him check his expression. "Sorry," he murmurs. "I'm feeling...protective."

"Understandable," she says, smiling and reaching for the baby. "Where is my little boy!"

"Heeere," I sing, carefully handling over the little bundle to his auntie. We dressed him, before we left, in the little cream sleep sack that we had packed in the hospital bag.

"Cutieeee," Cora coos, holding the baby close and peering down at his little face. She beams at him for a moment before looking up at me. "First night go okay?"

I tell her the details of our first night while Sinclair stands firmly at my side, letting me communicate everything. As I speak, Hank and his team begin to break up, preparing the various checks and treatments that I'll be receiving today. Then, he comes over to us.

"Okay, Ella," he says, giving me a smile. "The plan is that me and my team are going to ensure that you're perfectly healthy. And Cora and hers are going to make sure that Rafe is in top shape. It's going to take awhile but," he glances up at Sinclair quickly and shrugs, "I thought it best to check everything, rather than skimp."

"Damn right, you'll check everything," Sinclair growls, crossing his arms over his chest.

I look up at him and put a hand on his arm. "You need to cool it, Dom," I murmur, giving him a little smile. He sighs and nods, making me laugh. I can tell that he's on edge, fighting his new dad instinct to do everything he can – absolutely everything to protect his vulnerable mate and newborn child.

—

“It’s all right,” Hank says, smiling between us. “You’re in good hands.” Then, he nods at Cora, pausing a moment to place a warm hand on her back between her shoulder blades. I blink, a little surprised, when she simply nods and flinches away from his touch a little bit..

What’s this? I think to myself, a little happiness building in my stomach. But then I chide myself for being happy that there might be discord in my sister’s new relationship. You’re team Cora, I remind myself. Team Cora, whatever that means for her. That’s what side you’re on.

But inside of me, my little wolf turns in a smug little circle, nudging me to let me know that she, at least, knows that I’m lying to myself. But I give her a little nudge in return and she curls up, content to see where this goes.

A few hours later, I’m dozing quietly in a hospital bed, waiting for test results. Rafe is away in the newborn room next door with other babies who were born at the hospital yesterday and today, apparently to be monitored and to give me some time to rest, but I find that I’m restless without him near me. Still, my exhausted body takes advantage of the quiet and I do find myself dozing in and out of sleep.

Sinclair, apparently, has no such qualms about the baby being out of the room, and snores lightly next to me.

I’m instantly awake, though, when the door opens and Dr. Hank comes back into the room. “Sorry,” he says, giving me a little grimace. “I didn’t mean to wake you when you probably need the sleep.

“No,” I sigh, tucking my hair behind my ears as I hear Sinclair stop snoring next to me and sit up in his chair. “It’s all right – I didn’t sleep well without the baby nearby anyway.” I shrug. “Mom stuff.”

“Wolf stuff, too,” Hank murmurs, coming close to the bed. “It’s very interesting – studies have shown that wolf mothers do indeed sleep better if they have physical contact with their child.” He glances between my mate and me. “You two may want to consider systems of co-sleeping in a family bed.”

I beam at the idea, turning to Sinclair to see what he thinks, but he just blinks blearily at me. “Ella,” he says, “you spent hundreds of dollars on bassinets – now you want to put the baby in the bed with us?”

“In the nest!” I exclaim, excited, clutching my hands under my chin with glee. Sinclair

murmurs something about us being wolves, not birds, but I ignore him, turning my attention back to Hank. So, am I okay? Can I go home?"

He lifts a clipboard from the bottom of my bed, reading through some of the doctor reports there, and then nods happily to me. "I'm happy to report that you're doing beautifully, Ella. Strikingly healthy – perhaps more than can be expected, after a traumatic birth experience. But perhaps that can be attributed to...your gift? Or however that works."

I nod, understanding and accepting the mystery for what it is.

"If only all mothers had access to such a gift," Hank says, smiling at me warmly. "That would be quite a boon, wouldn't it?"

I nod, agreeing heartily, but then I freeze, suddenly struck with an idea...

But I'm interrupted by the door opening again, a nurse coming into the room with the baby.

I give a little cry of happiness when I see my child and open my arms towards the nurse, eager to hold him again.

"He's hungry," she says, smiling at me. I thank her and bring my child close to my chest, preparing to feed him again. Hank, a little awkward, clears his throat and turns away from me to give me privacy.

"So, if Cora gives you the okay to take him," Hank continues, looking up at the ceiling, "then you're free to go. And I'll see you in a couple of weeks!" With that, he turns towards the door, ready again

to leave without acknowledging that he's been with us again through one of the scariest and most traumatic moments of my life, that he's become an important person to me, and that he's dating my sister.

"Hank," I call to him before he can leave. He turns back to me, curious. I take a moment to look him clearly in the eyes, hoping he can see the depth of my warm feelings to him. "Thank you, Hank," I say, sincere.

He surprises me, then, by placing a hand to his heart and giving me a tiny little bow, the sort of genuflection that one would give to...well, to a queen. "It was my pleasure," he murmurs, true warmth in his voice. Sinclair and I both smile at him in return and he turns to leave again.

But, once more, I call him back.

“Hank?”

He pauses again at the door, turning towards me. “What, precisely,” I ask carefully, “are your intentions with my sister?”

Chapter 297 – Home with Baby

Ella,

I hear Sinclair sigh heavily next to me, murmuring “Ella...”

But I ignore him, my eyes fasted on Hank, who blushes a deep red at the door and looks down at his shoes. I don't say a word, though, or make this any easier on him. Instead, I wait patiently for an answer. “Cora is,” he murmurs, awkward, “very special to me...”

“I would imagine so,” I reply, my voice harder than I think I expected it to be. “She's a very special person.”

Hank sighs and raises his eyes seriously to mine. I hold his gaze steadily.

“I'm very serious about Cora,” he says evenly. “I want to build a life with her. But we are moving...slowly. We both want to make sure that this is right.”

My heart warms when I hear him say that he wants to build a life with her, but still – what does that mean? I hold my baby closer to me and shift in my seat. “And do you want to have children?”

“Ella!” Sinclair bursts in, his voice angry, a hand on my arm. “What!” I cry, turning to him with a frown. “It's a legitimate question!”

“It's none of your business!” He hisses back to me, his eyes wide and appalled.

—

my sister's business is

My frown deepens as I open my mouth to object to my mate business, after all – but Hank clears his throat, bringing my attention back to him.

“If there's nothing else,” he says, his eyes flicking between Sinclair and I now, clearly hoping

that my questioning is at an end. I sigh, nodding, as Sinclair speaks.

“Thank you, doctor,” he says with finality, letting Sinclair know he's free from my interrogation. “We'll look forward to seeing you soon.” (1

I scowl as Hank leaves the room, my eyes on my baby. “Ella,” Sinclair says slowly, admonishing. I look into his eyes, still mad.

“We need to know, Sinclair. She’s not with Roger because she thinks he wants children they can’t have. If Hank also isn’t on the same page with her about kids, then what’s the point?”

Sinclair’s eyes go up in surprise as he processes this information. “And what’s Cora’s page about kids?” he asks. “Does she want them?”

“Does Roger?” I ask, still bristling that he didn’t let me get information that I very much wanted.

He frowns a little, staring into space and considering it. “Actually, I don’t know…” He brings his eyes back to me, though. “Either way, that’s a conversation between Cora and Roger. Or Cora and Hank. Or…whoever.”

“And me,” I murmur, settling back onto the pillows. “If they’re all too stupid enough to not talk to each other about it, then I am going to talk about it.”

“Trouble is as trouble does,” Sinclair sighs, leaning back on the chair. “I guess I shouldn’t have expected any different.”

“Damn straight,” I murmur in response, smiling down at my baby. Then, I kiss him on his little head. “Don’t worry, baby,” I whisper to him. “I’ll teach you my troublesome ways. And then we’ll torture daddy together.”

Sinclair huffs a little laugh in his chair, but doesn’t bother to counter me. He knows it would be a waste of breath.

Night has fallen by the time we finally get home, all three of us exhausted by the activities of the day. But Cora finally gave us the go-ahead when Rafe’s final set of tests came back clean and we happily headed out.

When we cross the threshold into our home, I gasp a little when I see the variety of gift baskets and flowers waiting for us. “Oh,” I say, fascinated, moving forward to look at them all. Then I look up at my mate. “Did you do all this?” I ask, my eyes wide.

“No,” he says, his eyebrows also raised in interest as he checks some tags on a few of them. “ They look to be presents from friends and well-wishers. See?” He points to one filled with hand-drawn cards set neatly around a fluffy teddy bear. “This one’s from James and Isabel…”

“Oh,” I say, reaching for it, my eyes suddenly filled with sharp tears. “Oh, I miss them…” I bite my lip against the sudden rush of feelings, overwhelmed by all the love in the room when I’ve been so distracted – I haven’t even kept up with everyone as well as I should have

“No no,” Sinclair says quickly, taking me by the shoulders and moving the baby and I towards the stairs. “We’re way too tired for this – if you get into all these cards now, you’ll cry yourself to death –”

“But the teddy bear!” I cry, looking over my shoulder at it as Sinclair guides me up the stairs, a steady hand on my back. “Rafe’s first teddy – we have to get it!”

“It will be there in the morning,” Sinclair says, steady, yawning. “Now? Bed.”

“Okay,” I sigh, nodding to his wisdom and allowing myself to be shepherded upstairs. When we reach the door to our bedroom, though, my eyes fill with tears again as I look up at my mate.

“Baby,” he murmurs, taking my chin between his fingers, exhausted but wanting to be there for me. “What is it this time? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say, my voice trembling a little, looking between him and the baby. “Just... we’re bringing him home for the first time, Dominic. Putting him to sleep in his own little bed. It’s just...” I shrug, not really knowing how to put all of my emotions into words. “It’s big.”

Sinclair rests his head against mine, speaking to my soul as much as mind as he confirms this. I know, he says, simply. And so I rest my body against him – against the warm, steady bulk of him, grateful – again – to have a mate who understands me so completely. Who doesn’t think I’m crazy or overwrought.

Who understands, really, that this is all a dream to me. And that every moment of it – even one as simple as this is a miracle.

–

“Come on, darling,” he says, after a moment, pulling me further into the room. “Let’s get him settled.”

And so we do. We bring Rafe into our room, and we change him into his tiny sleeping clothes, and we feed him, and tuck him away into the rolling bassinet that I pull close to my side of the bed. And then we each take a shower, and change into soft clothes, and curl up into bed ourselves, one of us always with an eye on our precious, adorable, wonderful little boy.

Sinclair lays behind me, my body pressed tight against his. He is propped up on his arm as he looks over me and into the bassinet at my side. I, too, look down at the sleeping baby.

"I think he's like, really cute," I whisper, considering him carefully. Sinclair laughs lightly, careful not to wake him. "Of course he is."

"No," I say, not taking my eyes from my son. "Like, really cute. Like way cuter than most babies. And that's not just me being his mom – I think he's objectively...really cute."

"He takes after his mother," Sinclair says, laughing lightly and letting his head fall down onto the pillow, closing his eyes. I snuggle down next to him, still looking at my sleeping son.

"Yes, after me," I murmur, pleased and a little teasing.

"So he's cute," Sinclair whispers. "And he'll be trouble."

"No," I say, feeling myself drift off to sleep. "He'll be perfect." "We'll just see about that," Sinclair murmurs, his breathing already deepening as he drifts off.

Fifteen minutes later, Rafe chooses a side. And, unfortunately for me, he chooses trouble. And he cries.

All. Night. Long.

Chapter 298 – On Mom Time Now

For the next two weeks, Sinclair and I don't get much sleep. Instead, our precious. Darling. Wonderful. Amazing. Bundle. Of. Joy...tortures us until we're basically mindless drones, trying to figure out what he wants and giving it to him as soon as possible.

"Oh my god," I say to Sinclair one night at three in the morning, desperate with anxiety and lack of sleep. I walk around the room with Rafe pressed close to my chest, trying to comfort him. "He's been fed, changed, burped... he's probably just sleepy! But he's keeping himself up with all this noise he's making!"

"It will be all right," says my ever-patient mate, holding out his arms. I passed the baby to him and... Rafe instantly quiets.

And this is the moment when I simultaneously figured out the best and the worst thing in my life: that my mate is a baby whisperer, and that my child loves his dad more than he loves me.

Of course, I'm so exhausted at this point that I don't really care that Rafe quiets in Sinclair's arms and not mine. I'm just glad that he's quiet. "Okay," I whisper, slowly backing away, as if from a live grenade. "You just hold him...just like that..."

"Ella," Sinclair says, giving me a tiny scowl. "Don't be ridiculous – it's not as if –" but he takes one step towards me and Rafe begins to cry. I freeze like a deer in the headlights. So does Sinclair. Slowly, he takes a step backwards. Rafe quiets.

"Right there, Dominic," I whisper, backing away towards the bed. "Just stand there for... two, three hours..." I murmur as I climb into my messy nest, "and I'll see you both... later..."

"This is ridiculous, Ella," Sinclair half-whispers to me, but he doesn't move. I barely hear him as I almost immediately fall asleep. We're both completely at Rafe's mercy. He's the Alpha now.

When I wake up a few hours later, the sun is peeking into the room and I raise myself on my elbows, looking around. I see that Sinclair made his way to the rocking chair in the corner of the room and he's sleeping there now, the baby laid flat in a bassinet pulled close. I smile to see that Sinclair rests a large hand on the edge the basket, though, ready to respond if Rafe makes a move or a sound.

–

I laugh a little to myself and shake my head, wondering at the power this little baby has over us. I pull myself out of bed, though, and go to look at both of them my gigantic mate, my tiny baby, next to each other. They look so alike – their coloring, some of their

features, the and yet so incredibly different. My heart wrenches with love to see them there. same

–

I stretch my arms over my head and decide to let them sleep, turning to quickly and silently pad out of the room and go down to the kitchen.

This, oddly enough, has become where I spent most of my time now because I am constantly – constantly – hungry. I had assumed that my hunger would abate after I gave birth and was no longer growing a twelve pound baby within a five-month span, but I am still voracious. I head straight to the pantry, reaching for the big box of shredded wheat as well as a king-sized candy bar. I peel the latter open as I head to the counter and pour the former into a bowl.

Slowly munching on the candy, I wonder if I'm going to be hungry like this for the duration of the time that I'm breastfeeding Rafe. I look down at myself, considering that I'm relatively lucky – my body has bounced back fast, at least in terms of health, probably because of my wolf biology and my mother's gift. My figure still hasn't returned to what it was before I was pregnant – I don't care about that but health-wise, I feel as fit as I've ever been.

Smiling to myself, I say a little prayer of thanks and go to grab the milk out of the fridge.

"Chocolate?" someone asks, and I give a little shriek, jumping in the air and spinning around – looking everywhere for the intruder. I'm still panting and on edge when my eyes land on Roger, grinning at me from the doorway. "Chocolate for breakfast? What kind of role model are you being for your child, Ella?" he scolds jokingly.

"First of all," I say, brandishing my candy bar at him, "I'm eating this for him, because he demands it. And also, I'm also eating shredded wheat!" I say, gesturing towards my cereal bowl. "So, healthy!"

Roger laughs and comes forward to give me a hug, which I warmly return. "Eat whatever you want, Ella. Just don't bankrupt my brother to the candy company."

"No promises," I return, returning to the fridge to grab the milk and making my way back to the bowl. "Why are you here so early?" I ask, curious. "We don't need you here until nine."

Roger raises his eyebrows at me and taps his watch. My eyes go wide with disbelief and I glance towards the stove, which reads 9:08. "Oh my god!" I say, looking back at my brother-in-law. "I can't believe it! We're so late!"

He just shrugs and leans against the counter. "It's all right, you're on mom time. It's understandable."

"No, it's not!" I say, tossing the milk back in the fridge without pouring it and bolting for the stairs, "If we miss our appointment at the temple, we'll never get another one! And then the moon ceremony won't happen for another month and everything will be ruined!"

Roger follows to watch me sprint up the stairs, calling after me. "I think they'll make an exception for you, Ella! For the woman who ended the war!"

"No excuses for being rude!" I call over my shoulder, pushing through the door into my room. "Sinclair, quick! We overslept!"

An hour and twenty-two minutes later, we arrive at our appointment at the temple, just barely on time. Cora is there already, waiting anxiously on the steps. She storms over to me the moment we step out of the car.

"Ella!" my sister hisses. "You're late! You left me here all alone, with all the wolves!"

I screw up my face in confusion as I give her a little glare. "We're not late yet," I huff, reaching into the car to unhook the baby's car seat. "And since when do you care about being alone with wolves? You're alone with wolves all the time."

"Yeah, you, and Sinclair, and Rafe," she murmurs, glancing awkwardly over her shoulder at the temple. "Not...strangers."

I look at her carefully as I straighten, Rafe's car seat handle looped over the crook of my arm. He is, thankfully, quiet and calm. "I didn't know you were uncomfortable, Cora," I say softly. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," she says, rolling her eyes. "I just...don't like being late."

I nod, but study her a little bit. Only since after the war has Cora felt this way about being a human amongst wolves. Did her breakup – or was it even a breakup? – mess with her mind this much? I'm about to ask, but unfortunately the man in question comes around the car at just that moment.

"Hello, Cora," Roger says softly, carefully. "It's nice to see you."

Cora doesn't say anything, just looks at him with a little disdain. I raise my eyebrows and look between them. I know that they haven't seen each other since Rafe's birth – but they had been fine with each other in the room that night. What did I miss?

Chapter 299 – Godparent Duties

“Welcome,” a priestess says, coming out of the temple and giving us a big smile. I return her smile eagerly, walking up the stairs carrying the car seat and introducing our party. She knows who we are, of course – nobody could mistake Sinclair for anyone else anymore, not with his face all over the media every day and his coronation imminent.

But as she nods a hello to all of us and walks us into the temple itself, I do wonder if she knows ...that she’s running a temple dedicated to my mom. I mean, it’s not precisely public knowledge, but I do wonder how much she suspects.

Cora walks next to me, looking around the beautiful open space of the temple, her eyes inevitably drawn to the gorgeous, giant gold mosaic of the Goddess built into the wall behind her altar. After she looks at the image for a moment, she turns to me and smirks a little.

I can’t help the giggle that escapes my lips and I cover my mouth in a hurry. The image looks nothing like our mom. But, I guess it doesn’t matter, and it certainly won’t do any good to tell them they’ve got it all wrong.

The priestess looks at us curiously, but I shake my head in apology, silently asking her forgiveness. She just gives us a warm smile and leads us to a set of chairs set next to a calm reflecting pool in one corner of the room.

“So,” she says, smiling at the four of us as we seat ourselves and peering down at the baby. We’re here to plan little Rafe’s dedication to the goddess, yes?”

I quirk my head to the side, curious. “I thought it was a moon baptism?”

She laughs a little and gives me a smile. “Yes, a more colloquial term, I think, but not inaccurate. Though, of course, he will not be sprinkled with any holy water as in a Christian baptism. Many of the other traditions, though, are similar.’

The priestess looks to Roger and Cora now. “You two, I assume, are being presented as godparents?” Roger nods solemnly but Cora looks anxious. I reach out and take her hand.

The priestess seems to notice Cora’s unease and gives her a smile. “That’s all right – it’s not a hard job, even though you two will have more to do than the parents. On the evening of the full moon, the two of you will take the child into the woods by yourselves –”

“The woods? By ourselves?” Cora asks, a little aghast. “Yes,” the priestess says, blinking at her in surprise. “Did no one tell you?”

“No,” she huffs, looking at me and Sinclair with wide eyes. “I thought we had to go to a church, hold him over a...baptismal font. Or whatever.”

The priestess shakes her head slowly, hesitant now at Cora’s apparent protest. “No, we plan the event here at the temple, but the actual ceremony occurs in the open air. Under the light of the first full moon after the child’s birth.”

—

“What’s the problem, Cora?” I ask, confused but working to be gentle. “You’re an OBGYN – babies are your thing you’ll be totally fine. “No, it’s fine,” Cora says, looking down at her hands, clearly flustered. “I just...didn’t know.”

The priestess looks to me, still hesitant, but I smile at her encouragingly and nod. Then, she explains the details of the rest of the process to us, answering our questions and making sure that we all know our roles. It’s a new experience for me, of course – I myself was not dedicated to the goddess under the light of the full moon. But Sinclair and Roger were, and it’s an important ceremony to usher my baby into his culture. I have to admit, I’m excited for it.

As I look at Cora, though, I’m shocked to see that she’s clearly uncomfortable. I frown, confused and a little frustrated. This was in no way out of her comfort zone, as far as I knew – all she had to do was carry a baby into the woods a little distance. What the hell was going on?

When the priestess finishes explaining the details, she goes over some paperwork with Sinclair and I take the opportunity to talk to Cora alone.

“Cora,” I say casually, unbuckling Rafe from his carrier and lifting him into my arms. “Will you come help me? I want to feed him before the ride home.”

“Sure,” she says, unquestioning. Together, we head to the other side of the temple, to a quiet little alcove with a stone bench. “What is going on with you?” I ask, spinning on her with a little frown when we’re finally alone.

“Wha-” she says, blinking at me, her mouth falling open. “I thought we were coming to feed the baby –

“Oh he’s not hungry,” I say, waving a hand to dismiss her concern. “I just said that to get you over here. But seriously – what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she murmurs, uncomfortable, wrapping her arms around herself awkwardly.

“Seriously?” I huff, swatting at her, getting frustrated. “Cora – I can read you like a book.

I know you're upset. Just tell me!"

"Ella," she sighs, looking me in the eye. "I don't think you're realizing how weird this can all be for me. I mean, the world has changed now. It was different, when werewolves were a secret and I was one human who knew. Now everyone knows, and there's a huge rift between our two worlds! And I know that you're a wolf now, and I think that's great but..."

She shrugs and looks awkwardly around the temple. "But I'm a human," she continues, hesitant. "And it's...weird. You should hear the way that humans talk about the wolves, and the way they look at me when I say that I...I work with wolves, and I am an OBGYN for wolf kind as well as humans." She shrugs and my heart sinks to hear the pain in her voice. "They look at me like I'm a traitor, Ella. Some of the human women refuse to be seen by me because I work with wolves too."

"Oh, Cora," I murmur, taking a step closer to her and wrapping her in a one-armed hug, the baby between us. "You know that we don't feel that way, right? You are our family –"

"I know, Ella," she says, nodding, but still looking at the floor. "But even in this family – I know that you feel that I'm not different but," she hesitates and then glances over at Sinclair and Roger. "I'm not sure that's true of everyone."

I sigh, following her gaze across the room and focusing on Roger. He, I know, is the source of it all. What on earth happened between them?

"Has he said something to you, Cora?" I ask quietly, dying to know, but also really, really wanting to help her, to fix this rift between them. Even if they're never...what they were. It's important to me that they both feel comfortable around each other, for the baby's sake.

Cora bites her lip and I can tell that she doesn't really want to share. "Not really, Ella," she says, thinking through it herself. "It's less about what he said and more about how he acted. Just...when we came home, and there were more humans around, it just became abundantly clear that...we're from different worlds. And it's not just me who noticed it. He feels weird about it too."

Chapter 300 – A Brotherhood of Wolves

Sinclair

I move quickly through the paperwork that the priestess gives us, half of my attention on Ella and Cora across the room. Rafe isn't hungry yet I know this for sure, and I know that Ella knows too. He ate on the way here, in the car. So, what the hell is she up to?

I hand the paperwork back to the priestess, who gives us a warm smile and tells me she's looking forward to seeing us on the night of the full moon. Roger and I murmur our polite goodbyes and then we both turn our attention back to the sisters.

"What's going on over there," Roger asks, watching them with his arms crossed. I take a moment to look him over. His body is tense, his brow low with worry. "Why don't you tell me?" I say quietly, my voice low and a little frustrated.

My brother snaps his head back to me, frowning. "What?" "Come on, Roger," I respond, shaking my head. "Don't pretend they're not talking about you."

"Me?!" he says, aghast. "What did I do?" But towards the end of his sentence, his eyes flick to the floor. Guilty.

"What's even going on with you two?" I ask, sighing, not really wanting to have the conversation but feeling pressed to it now if it's disrupting our plans for our child's dedication. It's an important day – I want it to go smoothly, undisturbed by this drama.

"That's Ella," Roger murmurs, shaking his head, "speaking through you. You don't actually care what's going on between us."

"I do care," I return, a little offended. "I care, Roger. But yeah...Ella has brought this... issue to my attention. More than I would have noticed otherwise. She calls you two..." I sigh, a little embarrassed, "Codger."

"What?" he asks, confused, spinning to me. "What's Codger?"

"Your couple name," I say, sighing and pressing the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. "A mix between Cora and Rodger."

"Codger?!"

"It was that or Rora."

"Oh my god," he murmurs, putting his forehead in his hand and taking a deep breath. "You guys talk about it enough that it has a nickname?"

“She’s upset with you, Roger,” I explain, looking again at my beautiful, sweet mate, who wants the best for both of them. “I think Cora is upset. And I thought it was just Ella being Ella until...today. When I see that Cora really is upset. So, did you do something to her?”

My brother sighs again and runs his hand down his face so that it’s covering his mouth as he, too, looks across the room at this incredible pair of sisters. “I stopped calling her. I regret it, Dominic – I...” he sighs, as if having trouble putting it into words. “But it’s not easy, with her being a human. I thought it would be simpler, but it’s...”

I nod, understanding, and put a steady hand on his back, letting him know that I’m here. “You’ll figure it out,” I say, hoping it’s the right thing. He nods quietly, and I can tell that he hopes I’m right.

“But Rodger,” I say carefully. He looks up at me, a little exhausted but ready to listen. “If you mess up this ceremony...”

He opens his mouth to protest, but I hold up a hand. He shuts his mouth, letting me finish. “If you mess up this ceremony, Ella is going to kill both of us. Just rip us to shreds.”

A little laugh bursts from my brother and he shakes his head, looking over at her. “How is that even a threat?” he breathes, wondering. “She’s so...tiny.”

“Tiny,” I agree, “but fierce. And she’s got mom strength now. So let’s just...not cross her. And do our best to make Cora feel welcome, because if Cora’s not happy then Ella’s not happy, and if Ella’s not happy...”

Roger nods slowly, lifting his hand into the air and making an explosion sound with his mouth, simultaneously opening his hand like a bomb.

“Exactly,” I respond, nodding.

We’re silent for a moment, looking over at the girls, each thinking our private thoughts. But after a moment, Roger asks a question of his own.

“Wait,” he says, frowning at me. I start out of my reverie, looking at him. “If we’re Codger,” he muses, “...what are you?”

“Nothing,” I respond, firm, looking away. “We don’t need a couple name. We’re just Dominic and Ella.”

“Della,” he supplies. I glare at him.

“Elomonic?”

My glare turns into a snarl.

“Sinclella!” he says, starting to laugh. I just give him a shove, unable to help the smile that pulls at my lips.

“Shut up,” I murmur.

“Wait, no, it has to be Éclair!”

“Oh my god,” I breathe, defeated. “Don’t say that to her she’ll love it, she’ll never let it go

“I’m going to tell her right now —

Roger starts across the room, but I grab his arm, laughing.

“I swear to god, Roger, one word and I’m throwing you in the pool

Ella

I frown at my sister, confused and wanting to make it all better, and then I sigh when I realize that I can’t. “I guess I thought mom’s gift fixed it all,” I murmur, “after you gave it to the world. It was enough, I guess, to end the war to ask wolves and humans alike to stop fighting. But not enough to squash all of the fears and prejudices.”

Cora nods, agreeing, looking at me again and working hard to give me a little smile. “I want to be a part of your life, Ella,” she says, looking down at the baby and smiling. “And, of course, of baby Rafe’s. But if you could please try to remember that... I’m not as much a part of your world as you think I am, then that would be helpful.”

“You are a part of my world, Cora,” I insist, taking her hand and looking at her seriously. “You’re my flesh and blood, and you’ve always been my sister, even if we didn’t know about the biological part for a long time. There’s no part of you that’s not part of my world, okay?”

She nods, giving me a little smile. “But also,” I continue, still holding her gaze. “I hear you. And I’ll try harder. “Thanks, Ella,” she says, her voice soft.

I pull my sister close again for a hug, the baby fussing between us. We laugh, looking down at him, and then I nod towards the group, asking her if she wants to go back. Cora nods and, taking my hand, we return again to the wolves waiting for us.

Along the way, I admit that I’m torn. Because as much as I’m glad that my sister told me

what's wrong, I admit that I feel guilty. Guilty that she feels different at all, and guilty that...

Well, that I got so distracted in the pregnancy and the birth of my son. That I didn't even realize that my sister felt that way. That I didn't even realize that things were this bad, between the humans and the wolves.

Sinclair and Roger are laughing and roughhousing a little, by the looks of it, as we make our way over to them. I can't help smiling at this I like to see my mate happy and at peace. He catches my serious look, though, as I come more clearly into sight. He stops, then, looking curiously at me, quirking his head to the side. I just give him a little nod, letting him know all Because the two of us? The leaders of these people?

We have work to do. "Hey, Ella," Roger says, grinning wickedly at me. "Are you hungry, do you want some breakfast? Maybe some eclairs?"

Sinclair snaps his head to him. "You're dead." "Actually," I say, my eyebrows going up. "Pastries sound great."

Chapter 301 – Old Friends Home Again

Ella

The morning of the moon ceremony finds me, unsurprisingly, in the kitchen. Eating. Rafe is with me this time, giggling happily as I dance happily around the room with him, singing about how delicious carrots are as I pour some baby carrots out from their bag onto a plate and begin to munch on them.

I'm just getting to the part of the song which I'm making up as I go along about how they're good for your vision and help you make friends with rabbits when I hear an odd, familiar sound out in the hall.

I gasp, spinning towards the door as the mechanical hum grows louder, and I'm nearly run over when Henry wheels into the room.

"Henry!" I gasp, tears instantly lining my eyes, stumbling in my hurry to hug him close, almost falling into his lap.

"Steady, girl!" Henry laughs, putting out his hands to catch me and help me find my feet, laughing a little. He beams up at me and I'm laughing too, shaking my head at myself as I lean down to give him a proper hug and then a kiss on both cheeks.

"We missed you so much!" I gush, my heart in my throat as I pull away. "I'm so glad you're home – and in time! A miracle!"

"Certainly took some doing," he says, raising his eyebrows at me. "I rode in a cargo plane to get here – this little man had better impress." He shifts his gaze, then, to the baby in my arms.

"Oh!" I say, standing up straight and remembering my manners. "Henry, may I please have the pleasure of introducing you to your grandchild?"

"Nothing would give me more joy," he replies, his own eyes wet now. I lean down to place Rafe in his grandfather's arms for the first time, trying hard not to be overwhelmed by the beauty of the moment. "This is Rafe Henry Sinclair," I say quietly, watching his face.

"Rafe Henry," Henry says, looking up at me, touched, and then down at the baby. "He's a beauty, Ella. Wonderful." He shakes his head, staring at my son. Though I'm overwhelmed by the moment, part of me reflects that I'm glad Henry met Rafe while the baby is in a good mood. He still spends most of his time crying.

I hear footsteps on the stairs and look towards the door, smiling when I see Sinclair hurry through it.

“Dad!” he booms, a huge smile on his face. I step back as Henry turns his chair, raising one arm towards his son, the baby still held in the other. Sinclair bends down low to give his father a long, warm hug and I bite my lip to see it. Sinclair never admitted it, but he worried about his father, and missed him. He’s glad, I know, to have him back home, nearby.

The two release each other and the kitchen is filled with happy noise for the next few minutes as we all buzz around each other, trying to do nice things for each other and make sure everyone’s comfortable. I laugh after a minute, raising my hands and calling for silence.

“Okay!” I declare. “You two -” I say, pointing between Henry and Sinclair, “ go into the living room, take the baby, and relax. I’ll bring in coffee in a moment. Then we’ll catch up. All right?”

The two of them nod and comply, heading out of the room. A few minutes later I follow them carrying a silver tray heaped with coffee and food. My stomach rumbles as I look down at it all and I roll my eyes at myself. How can I still be hungry?

“He really is wonderful, Ella,” Henry says fondly, looking down at his grandchild when I enter the room.

“Yes, I’m easily persuaded of that,” I say casually, putting the tray down on the coffee table and sitting close next to Sinclair. “Would you like me to take him?”

“No,” Henry says quickly, looking up at me. “I mean if it’s all the same to you, I’ll hold him a little longer.” I nod eagerly, touched deeply to see the bond forming between them already.

“He looks like you,” Henry says, smiling at my mate. “You, too, were a little bowling ball when you were born. With the same shock of black hair.”

I bite my lip, pleased to hear these sorts of details that Sinclair wouldn’t know. Do you have pictures?” I ask, curious. Henry nods eagerly and promises to show them to me next time I’m over.

We spend a pleasant half hour catching up, with Henry telling us all about the harrows of his travel back to us, how much he wanted to get here in time for the ceremony. He also catches us up on the lives of our friends who we unfortunately had to left behind, and surprises us by telling us that Isabel, James, and Sadie came along with him so that they, too, could attend.

“Really?” I gasp, excited.

“Oh no,” Henry says, looking between us. “It wasn’t a secret, was it?” “Only until we knew for sure,” Sinclair says, smiling at me. “I didn’t want you to be disappointed if they couldn’t make it.”

“It’s wonderful,” I say, my eyes filling with tears again at the thought of seeing my friends. “Thank you.”

Sinclair murmurs “of course” and kisses my hair, but I also see him glance at the door. He’s torn, I know, between wanting to spend time with his dad and the duties I know are pressing on him to finish up before the ceremony tonight.

“Go,” I say, giving him a nudge and a smile. “We’re perfectly all right here on our own.” “Are you sure?” he asks, glancing at me first and then his father.

“Go!” His father says, waving his hand at his son. Then he smiles and pats the arm chair next to him. “You come sit by me, Ella.”

Grinning, I do as he says as Sinclair heads out of the room, a mix of regret and relief on his face. He wants to be here, I know but...well, heavy is the crown. “I’m so glad you’re here,” I say, smiling widely at Henry.

“Well, it’s a very important event,” Henry says seriously, nodding to me. “I know that you didn’t have a dedication, and that you haven’t been to one, but they are... they’re quite special, Ella. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Good,” I murmur, smiling down at my son. “I want everyone here who loves him.” “It feels like yesterday that Dominic and Roger were dedicated,” Henry muses, likewise looking at my boy and shaking his head. “I can’t believe it’s already time for a new generation.”

“Do you remember it well?” I ask, hoping that he’ll tell me more about it. “Oh yes,” Henry says, his eyes raised. “As well as the experience of being a godfather myself.”

“Godfather,” I consider, turning my head to the side. “Why not Goddessfather?” He laughs a little, shrugging. “Who knows, Ella. Simplicity or misogyny, take your pick.” I laugh with him, letting the question pass. He’s right – it doesn’t matter.

“So, you’re a godfather as well?” I prompt. Henry nods sagely. “Yes. It’s very special – very intimate. When you’re in the forest alone with the child you are” he pauses, considering how to phrase it. “You’re treated to some insights into the child’s spirit, their future. It’s quite unique. In exchange for the dedication, the goddess gives a... prophecy of sorts.”

My eyes go wide and I look down at my little boy, fascinated. "Really?" I breathe. "We get to learn about Rafe's future tonight?"

Chapter 302 – Moonlight Baptism

“Well,” Henry answers, hesitating. “Cora and Roger will see the prophecy.” My face falls a little when I realize the implications of this. “Really? Unfair,” I declare, pouting. Henry laughs a little along with me. “It will bring them closer to him, give them a bond.”

“Well,” I sigh, “I want them to have that. What sort of things do you learn, though? Do you share them with the parents?”

“If you choose,” Henry shrugs. “I always did. And Sinclair and Roger’s godparents shared with me, for which I was grateful.”

“What did they tell you?” I ask, curious. “That Sinclair would be a great leader of men,” Henry says, looking down at the baby again, clearly remembering his baby who looked so like this one. That was no surprise. But Roger, that was...”

I pause, curious, suddenly fascinated. “What did they say?” He hesitates and then meets my eye. “I never even told Roger about it. But they told me that his destiny laid less with who he was, and more with the children he would sire. The many children, who would be...” he looks away a bit, trying to sort his thoughts, “it was hard to understand. But something about a set of extraordinary children who would bring much joy to the world.”

My stomach drops at this, though I work hard to keep it off my face. I guess Cora was right. Being a father is important to Roger his destiny, even. And if Cora can’t give him children....

Henry meets, my eyes, perhaps understanding the direction of my thoughts. He takes my hand. “The goddess gives us many mysteries, Ella,” he says quietly. “Don’t think too hard on her messages – they often present themselves in the most surprising ways.”

“You’re right,” I say, giving him a little smile, fighting against my own disappointment. I sit up straighter in my chair, smiling down at my baby, who’s staring up at me with his wide eyes, which are just starting to turn green. “Besides, today is about this little one. And his future.”

“Precisely right,” Henry says, peeking over at him again. “And his future is very, very bright. This I know for sure.”

Our house is filled with people later that evening, and my heart is full to bursting to see all of them – especially Isabel, James, and Sadie, who I think I hugged for a solid fifteen minutes when they arrived.

Unfortunately, I didn’t get to catch up with them as much as I wanted to, as I have to greet all of our guests and introduce Rafe around to his new friends and family. But still,

Isabel and I make plans to have a good long talk later this week before Cora comes to stand with her, giving me a wink to let me know that she has our visitors in good hands.

I'm almost breathless with excitement and stress as the time approaches. Anxious, I straighten the top of my glittering silver gown, which I picked expressly for the occasion. It's perhaps too much for a trip to the woods, but we'll be having champagne later – and then everyone coming back to the house to celebrate all evening – so it seemed right that we be formal tonight. But was it right? God, I don't know. I've never held a midnight baptism before.

"Calmly," Sinclair says, coming up behind me, looking gorgeous in his tuxedo. He rests two reassuring hands on my shoulders. "Everything is in order, Ella – you don't need to micromanage everything. It's all going smoothly."

I laugh and shake my head, grateful that my mate can read my mind in more ways than one. "I just want everything to go smoothly, and everyone to have a nice time, and to make sure that everyone gets enough time with Rafe -"

"Not necessary," he whispers in my ear, and I can feel him smiling as he does it. "You don't need to be everything to everyone, trouble.. They're here to help you. You could have come down in pajamas ten minutes before the ceremony, with baby vomit streaked down your shirt, and no one would have cared."

"I would have cared," I say, turning on him with wide eyes. "Ew!"

He laughs, drawing me in for a quick kiss. "What I mean, Ella, is that you should just calm down and enjoy the night. It's for us, as much as for him. The guests are just happy to be along for the ride."

"You're right," I murmur, smiling against his lips and then looking down at my happy baby in my arms. "I need to...live in the moment."

"Right," he says, putting an arm around my shoulders and moving towards the door. "It's good that you figured that out now, because it's time to go."

"Oh!" I say, surprised, looking around at everyone who is likewise streaming towards the entrance, towards the two vans waiting to take us all out in the woods. "Oh, Dominic!" I say, spinning in his arms and looking towards the kitchen. "Did we remember the champagne – and all the glasses -"

"Packed, Ella," he says, looking down at me with a stern little smile. "Stop. Turn. Enjoy." I take a deep breath and look up at him with wide eyes, making him laugh. "I'll try. I really will."

He nods and bends down a little to grab Rafe's car seat, waiting by the door. "You try, I'll be here to help. We've got this, little mate."

I grin, standing on my tiptoes and turning my face up for another kiss, happy when my mate obliges. "Thank you, Dominic," I whisper, and then we're out the door. Off to the woods.

We arrive about forty minutes later and I'm thrilled to see that our guests are having a good time and that the baby is, miraculously, sleeping soundly in his car seat. I bite my lip, hoping he wakes up for the actual dedication part, though...

Well, I suppose it doesn't matter if he's awake or not. Cora and Roger have to do all the work, Rafe just has to...be there. "Ready?" Cora says, leaning across the aisle of the van and smiling at me.

"Are you?" I ask, raising my eyebrows at her. She nods eagerly. I lean closer, lowering my voice further, though I know it's more of a gesture than an effective way to pass a secret in this van full of wolves with enhanced hearing. (And are you two..." I glance furtively at Rodger.

Cora gives me a happy little nod. "We're all good, Ella," she says, smiling. I narrow my eyes and wonder if she's lying for my sake. My sister reads my mind, though, and laughs at me. "Seriously!" she says eagerly. "All good. We're here for Rafe, anyway."

"Okay," I say, my eyes still narrowed at her as I stand up and begin to unbuckle Rafe from his chair and lift him into my arms. Then, as a group, we all disembark from the vans. A special lift lowers Henry to the ground and, when he gives me a thumbs-up to let me know he's ready, we all spill out into the woods, preparing ourselves to dedicate my son to the Goddess.

Chapter 303 – Dedicated to the Goddess

Ella

As a group, we head together into the darkness of the forest. “Did we have to go somewhere so creepy for this?” I ask Sinclair, looking warily around the woods. Usually my wolf thrills to be under the canopy of the trees, but today, I can feel her wary inside me. “It’s a sacred space,” Sinclair explains, smiling down at me, placing one hand on my back to ensure that I don’t trip over any errant roots. “Are you feeling it too? The magic in the air?”

“How could I miss it,” I murmur, looking around. “This place is... thick with it.”

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It’s true – I can’t see anything in the air around us, but I’m certainly aware that this place is sacred. Either because it was always a special place, or made special due to the repeated process of bringing children here with the intent of dedication, this patch of forest is unique. Even the trees around us are just a little different – their trunks darker, thicker. The way that the branches twine up towards the sky is more elegantly twisted than I’ve seen elsewhere.

Overall it’s not a bad feeling just...different.

I glance over my shoulder at Cora, who I can see is uncomfortable. She’s the only human in the party today and, even though she doesn’t have a wolf who can sense the magic like mine can, I can tell that she, too, senses the difference of this place. I give her a warm smile which she returns, coming closer to my side.

“This place is weird,” she says softly, rubbing her hands up and down her arms as if she’s cold. “Scared,” I correct. “But yeah, sacred and weird.”

We take a little path deeper into the woods, worn flat enough by the passing of thousands of feet over the years that Henry’s chair has no trouble passing down it. When we lose sight of the vans behind us, so deep in the forest that the trees obscure our sight of the road, I see a figure ahead, dressed in silver robes.

“Welcome,” she calls to us, and I recognize the voice of the priestess who we met in the temple. We murmur our greetings when we come close and she bends down to smile at Rafe, who is still asleep in my arms.

“Are you ready?” The priestess asks me, and I feel a little twist in my stomach. Actually, I’m not ready – not at all. I haven’t been parted from Rafe since that day in the hospital where he slept in the nursery for a few hours. Since then, I haven’t been further than one room away from him, and even that I kept as short as possible. And now I was going to

hand him over to his godparents to take him into the woods alone at night?

All of my motherly instincts scream at me to take my baby home and curl up warm and safe in bed, but the priestess gives me a warm smile, perhaps reading my mind. My wolf gives me a little nudge with her nose too, letting me know that it's all right.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I sigh, still anxious. I feel Sinclair's hand press more firmly against my spine, supporting me.

"The child?" she asks, putting out her hands in a request for me to hand him over to her. Sighing, I do, and then I wrap my arms around Sinclair's waist, resting my head against his chest. I know that Cora and Roger will take good care of Rafe but...until I have my baby back, I'm going to need to keep Sinclair close.

The priestess coos to the baby, who starts to fuss in her arms, and then nods to Cora and Roger, who each take a step forward. She holds the baby carefully against her as she begins the

ceremony in front of our gathered group of family and friends.

"Who presents this child for dedication?" she calls out, her voice steady and resonant.

"We do," Sinclair responds, his voice resonant and strong. "His mother and I."

The priestess nods deeply to us, part of the ritual, recognizing our intent. Then, she continues. "And who will carry this boy to meet the Goddess?"

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"We will," Roger responds, taking a few steps to stand next to Cora and surprising me by taking her hand. I look up at Sinclair, wondering if that's part of the ceremony or just Roger being Roger, but my mate's face gives nothing away. I turn to Cora, then, who looks just as surprised as me. The priestess nods to Roger and Cora in turn and then crosses to them, placing my baby in my sister's arms. "Take him," she says, waving a hand behind her into the forest. "Forward, to the pool. Let him bask in the light of the full moon so that he may know his Goddess. In return, she may give you insight into his future life. Take it for the gift that it is."

"We will," Roger replies, steady. Cora nods as well, less sure about what to say but certainly determined to do right by her nephew.

The priestess nods again and steps aside so that Cora and Roger can pass.

Then, together, my sister and Sinclair's brother carry Rafe into the forest. I watch them

until they are swallowed by darkness, my heart in my throat. And then, when I can't see them anymore, I hold my breath and wait.

Cora

"You'd think," I mutter, frustrated as I trip again over another root, "that they'd spend a little more time clearing the path to this pool, if people come out here every month to dedicate their children."

"Here, give Rafe to me," Roger replies, wanting to be helpful but irritated, a little, by my slow pace. If you fall you'll crush him –"

"No!" I retort, glaring at him a little in the dark. "The priestess gave the baby to me, she wants me to carry him."

"I'm sure that's not what she meant, Cora," Roger replies, his voice a little crabby. "And she's not going to be happy if you give her back a flat pancake baby because you tripped

"

"Oh shut up," I say under my breath, hastening my pace in my eagerness to get this over with. There's no one I'd like to be alone in the woods with right now less than Roger Sinclair. But, I almost immediately trip over another root, stumbling in the darkness. Roger catches me in time, before I can indeed fall flat and crush the baby, grabbing me by the shoulders and steadying me.

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"All right?" he asks.

"Fine," I bite out, embarrassed and determined to get this done. I shoot him another little glare, but he just laughs at me and takes his hands away, putting them up like a criminal caught at gunpoint.

"Sorry," he says. "Next time I'll let you fall."

"Just... take the baby, okay?" I sigh, handing Rafe to Roger, who holds him awkwardly. It's my time to laugh a little now, derisive to see him holding the child like a football.

He shoots me a little glare of his own in response. "I don't...hold a lot of kids..." he murmurs, adjusting the fussing Rafe to try to make him more comfortable.

“Clearly,” I reply, crossing my arm’s and smirking at him.

“Let’s just go,” Roger sighs, starting off again into the woods.

I’m grateful, a few moments later, when I start to see the edges of a silver pool off in the distance.” Great,” I say, half to myself. “There’s the pool – now let’s go dedicate this kid and get this over with.”

“Agreed,” Roger replies, nodding and heading off ahead of me at a brisk pace.

“Hey!” I call after him, frustrated as he outstrips me. “Wait up!”

Chapter 304 – The Goddess’s Light

Cora

I’m a little out of breath when I finally catch up with Roger and Rafe, having had to work hard to keep up with his long wolf stride.

“Rude,” I say when I finally come to a stop next to them. “You couldn’t have waited for me?”

“I’m being rude?” Roger says, raising his eyebrows at me in disbelief. “Cora, you’ve been nothing but unpleasant since the moment we stepped into the forest –”

I open my mouth with a little squeak of protest but Roger just rolls his eyes and ignores me, going on anyway. “This is supposed to be a sacred experience for Rafe and for us and you’ve done nothing but moan and complain. So yeah, forgive me if I wanted to get away for a moment and concentrate on the magic of this place

“Oh whatever,” I mumble, reaching out my arms so that he can hand me the baby.

“No from you way,” Roger retorts, holding the baby closer to his chest and turning a little away from me. “You don’t get to hold the baby now that we’re at the pool

“Yes I do!” I cry, “the priestess gave him to me!”

“I’m his godparent just as much as you are

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But suddenly, there’s a flare in the light from the pool, and Roger and I turn to it, surprised, both of our mouths falling open. I don’t know how I know it but...well, somehow, I get the sense that the pool – or whatever magic is in it – is irritated with us.

“Sorry,” I murmur to the pool, taking a step closer, a little embarrassed. Honestly, it never occurred to me that my behavior with Roger right now was being...watched.

Roger murmurs his own apology, coming closer to the edge. We look at each other, then, united anew at being...well, a little freaked out, suddenly. We’re both very aware that there’s magic in the world, but sometimes when you’re confronted with it so blatantly it can be weird.

I take a deep breath, then, nodding to him, and start to say that words that the priestess taught us as part of the ceremony.

“Goddess,” I begin, letting my voice ring out across the smooth surface of the silver pool. “We bring to you, tonight, this child, so that he may begin to know you.”

“We wish to show him your light, and in doing so, let you see him and bring him into the spirit of your grace,” Roger continues, his own resonant voice sending shivers down my spine. The light coming off the pool brightens – slower this time, though, as if she’s listening.

I glance upwards through the trees and am treated by the sight of the full moon itself, beaming brilliantly down on us from above. Hey, mom, I say quietly in my mind, my heartrate

suddenly increasing and my stomach twisting with the emotion of the moment. Because she is here, now, with us – ready to meet her grandchild. I can feel it.

Even Rafe begins to open his little eyes and look around. I know that he can’t really see anything – his vision hasn’t developed well enough yet – but he’s certainly curious. I put my hands out for him and this time Roger does hand him to me, letting me take the baby and unwrap his swaddling blanket. Then, when he’s free of it, Roger and I slowly walk as close as we can to the edge of the pool and hold the baby out over it.

The moonlight streams down onto the baby, growing brighter as the moments pass. My heart fills to see Rafe looking up into the sky, to see the light surrounding him as it falls from the moon above and reflects upwards from the mirrored surface of the pool.

“He is called Rafe Sinclair,” Roger says softly, reverent. “His parents, Ella and Dominic, have asked us to bring him here to dedicate him to you. We do so in their name.”

I smile as I look at the baby, and at Roger, and at the moonlight. It’s a beautiful moment, introducing the child to the world and to all the magic within it. I open my mouth to say something, to tell Roger that I’m sorry, and that I’m glad I’m here with him to do this, when suddenly I can see something in the moonlight.

I gasp, suddenly afraid, but Roger brings a quick hand to my waist, steadying me.

“Don’t pull the baby back,” he says, peering into the white light of the moon, likewise trying to make it out. “If you do, we won’t be able to see...”

So I keep holding the baby out, my arms trembling a little, and watch the story form in the air.

It’s not...not totally visual. Like, it’s not like watching a movie projected into smoke in the air. Instead, it’s...felt as much as it is seen, communicated to our hearts and minds as

much as our eyes. But suddenly, quite suddenly, it's perfectly clear.

I see a little boy, tall, with warm green eyes bending down to take the hand of a dark-haired little girl who has fallen to the ground, helping her up and brushing the tears from her face. Then, I see him again – older, but still young.- running across a battlefield, fear on his face but courage in every line of his limbs as he pushes himself to do what is right. We're passed that quite quickly, though, and I see him again with that girl – though she's older now too – laughing. And though I know there's no reason for me to know it, I sense – somehow that she, like me, has no wolf.

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Rafe – he has a crown on his head, and another in his hands, which he slowly lifts to place on the girl's head as well. She smiles up at him with such love in her eyes and then the door to the room bursts open, his family spilling in

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There's Sinclair, and Ella, and more of their children – and a light-haired boy I don't know, just about Rafe's age- and more children, so many more and me and...and...

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Rafe is embraced by his family, who surround him, laughing and hugging Rafe and the girl, their eyes warm and light with hope. And suddenly, I know, that Rafe will be a great leader of

his people, and that he will guide them with love in his heart, a love sustained and made true by this girl. I know that Rafe will meet his mate and that she will be...

Human.

I gasp, my eyes filling with tears, and slowly the moonlight fades, returning to its natural hue. I bring the baby back to my chest, holding him tight, and turn to look up at Roger, who looks at me as well with tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Did you see it?" he whispers.

"Yes," I reply.

"He will love her," Roger continues, shaking his head, staring down at me with so much love in his eyes. "And it won't matter to him – not at all –"

I'm crying in truth then, little sobs wracking my chest as I hold my nephew to me. My

nephew, with his whole life laid out before him, a great love waiting for him in the future to sooth the great pain he will surely endure as he leads his people, human and wolf alike. I open my mouth to say something to Roger – to say anything –

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But no words come out. Instead, I just tuck my head against my nephew and let myself cry.

How can this little baby, only two weeks old, already hold so much wisdom? How can he have already have given me such a gift?

I feel Roger's arms around us then, warm and steady. He brings me close to his chest, tucking me beneath his chin and pressing a kiss to my hair. Then, silent, he lets me cry, lets me process the experience all I need. A few minutes later, when I am again steady, I take a deep breath and turn my face up to him, ready to give him my thanks.

But before I can say anything, Roger acts, closing the distance between us.

And pressing a soft kiss to my mouth.

Chapter 305 – Sister Talk

Ella

It feels like my sister has been gone with my baby for...hours. But in reality I know that it has been, at best, maybe half an hour. Still, while the rest of us mill around the dark forest, drinking champagne and waiting, I can't keep myself from continuing to glance anxiously into the darkness.

What's keeping them? Why won't they come back? "Patience, trouble," Sinclair says behind me and I sigh. Without looking at him, I lean back against his chest and raise my champagne flute to my mouth, taking a little sip.

"Those are two words that don't go together, and you know it," I mutter, frustrated. His warm chuckle resonates against my back as he wraps an arm—around me. "Only you would try to rush a goddess."

"She's my mom!" I huff, looking up at him as I cross my arms. "I'll rush her all I want. Sinclair laughs again and shakes his head at me. "Let Cora and Roger have this time with Rafe. It's special for them too."

"I'm dying to know if they'll see anything about his future," I say, looking back at my mate with a wide smile. "Do you think they will?"

"If I had to put money on it?" Sinclair says, contemplative. "Considering who Rafe's grandmother is? Then...yeah, I think they'll get a glimpse. But don't push them too hard on it, Ella," he advises. "It's their experience as much as his. If they choose to keep it to themselves, that's their right."

"Oh, yeah, whatever," I say, rolling my eyes. Fat chance I'm letting Cora keep secrets about my son's future from me. As my mind goes wild with the possibilities, I see something flicker in the darkness. I stand up straight, eager, peering into the darkness. I feel Sinclair do the same behind me.

And then I burst into a little joyous laugh as I see my sister, Rafe tucked happy in her arms, coming through the trees, Roger's arm warm around her shoulder. Sinclair puts two fingers in his mouth and lets out a sharp whistle as I shout "Cora!" and dash into the woods, happy to see all three of them.

My sister gives me a broad smile as we meet beneath the trees, happily handing my baby over into my waiting arms. I coo a little greeting to him, doing a little check down the bond to see that he's fine. When I'm satisfied that he's happy and relaxed I look up at Roger and Cora eagerly. "So?" I ask, a little breathless. "How'd it go?"

"It went well," Roger says reassuringly. "No problems, he did beautifully."

“Of course he did!” I laugh, smiling down at my baby, who fusses a little in his blankets. He’s tired, I’m sure, even though he’s always up at this time of night anyway. “He didn’t have to do much, after all, just lay out basking in the moonlight.”

Cora laughs and steps away from Roger, putting an arm around me. “Come on, sis,” she says. Let’s go get a glass of champagne and I’ll tell you everything.”

When we return to the little group of family and friends, everyone lets out a little cheer and raises their glasses to us, a gesture that fills me with warmth. It is so wonderful to see this milestone in my child’s life celebrated so. I lean down and give my baby a little kiss on the head as Sinclair hands Cora and Roger glasses of champagne and then comes to my side.

“How is he?” Sinclair murmurs, leaning down to check on the baby.

“Perfect, angelic, magnificent, as usual,” I murmur. “As usual?” Sinclair asks, raising an amused eyebrow at me. “Usually he’s screaming like a banshee.”

I blink innocently at my mate. “That does nothing to take away from his perfection. He’s just... expressive.”

Sinclair laughs and shakes his head at me a little and then turns to Cora and Roger, who come closer to us. “Soooooo?” I ask leadingly, excited. “Did you...see anything?”

“Ella,” Roger says, smirking at me and sinking his hands into his pockets. “Don’t you know that it’s a private affair, what happens between a child, his godparents, and the goddess on the night of his baptism?”

“I swear, Roger,” I warn, narrowing my eyes at him, “if you keep this from me, I will torture you for the rest of your life –”

My brother-in-law bares his teeth at me playfully, leaning forward. “Ah, Ella, but don’t you see? Now I have the power to torture you, as I have information you want, and I’m going to make you pay through the nose for it.”

“You’re dead to me,” I declare impassively, turning to my sister. “Well?” I ask, my question directed only to her as Roger laughs.

“Oh, you know,” she says casually, unable to keep her lips from twitching. “We just saw the normal sorts of things for a little boy. His life is going to be rather boring, actually. Uneventful, dull.”

“What?!” I ask, my face falling, glancing between her and the baby.

“Yeah,” she says with a little shrug. “We saw a lot of crossword puzzles in his future. He’s going to get really, really into rock collecting, but not in an interesting way that leads to a career in geology. Just...hoarding rocks. In his bedroom. Through his forties.”

I snap my eyes back up to her and glare, taking in the little smile on her lips. “Liar,” I say, starting to laugh, my sister joining in with me. She glances back at Roger, who wrinkles his nose at her and raises his champagne glass in her direction. I watch this exchange, curious. Did something...else happen in the woods?

But I don’t let myself be distracted. “Come on, Cora,” I push, taking her by the arm and drawing her away from Sinclair and Roger. “Tell me, please, for real. Did you see anything?”

“We did,” she says, warm. “He has...a big future, Ella. But it will be a happy one, with love and courage to balance the trials. I know more but...do you want to know?”

And suddenly I realize that...I don’t. I look my sister in the eyes and realize that...well, that I want to be surprised. That I want to watch my son’s life unfold organically, to experience it along with him. I tilt my head to the side, considering it, and realizing that this is perhaps why godparents take the child to this ceremony – because the gift of the goddess is too much for those who love him most. That perhaps the best gift is the mystery.

“No, Cora,” I say, putting out an arm and pulling her close in a hug. “Thank you. That’s perfect. That’s all I need.”

She nods to me, understanding, and turns to rejoin the group. But I don’t let her go just yet.

“Cora,” I whisper, pulling her close again, biting my lip eagerly. “When you went into the woods with Roger you were...different than when you came out. Did...did something...”

She just gives me a little smirk and a shrug. “That, sister,” she says quietly, pulling me forward, “is a secret I’m keeping to myself. You’re too nosy. Some things are private.”

“So there is a thing!” I exclaim, digging in my heels, desperately wanting to know this mystery, if not my son’s. “If you’re keeping something private, something happened!”

“Come on, Ella,” Cora says, laughing at me. “Come celebrate with us. I’m not telling you a thing.”

“She’s selfish, Rafe,” I sigh, shaking my head down at my son, who is falling asleep. “Cruel auntie doesn’t tell us anything. But you know, and I’ll get you to tell me as soon as

you're big enough to talk."

He just makes a face and squirms away from me a bit. I narrow my eyes at him, wondering if my baby is taking Cora's side.

"Come on, little mate," Sinclair says, wrapping an arm around me and ushering me forward into the group. "Let everyone see the baby, and then let's go home. It's time for breakfast."

Chapter 306 – Old Friends

Ella

Two hours later, Sinclair and I welcome our friends back to our house for a casual breakfast and coffee or mimosas, according to preference to celebrate Rafe's moonlight baptism. I can tell our guests are dragging – they've been up all night, after all – but spirits are high.

"Wow," I say, leaning back against Sinclair's chest with a croissant in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other. Rafe, thankfully, is asleep in his little recline stroller. Usually I'd put him to bed in his crib, but I want people to be able to say goodbye if they have to leave. "I can't believe everyone I still up," I say, peering around at our friends and family. "I mean, I know we're on baby time so normal hours mean nothing anymore, but everyone else..."

"It's a special occasion," Sinclair murmurs; lowering his face to my hair and taking a long sniff of my scent. "We're used to it. In wolf culture shifter children are rarer than we'd like, so we take the time to celebrate them when they're born."

"That's so nice..." I say, sniffing a little, my eyes filling with tears. "What?" Sinclair asks, pulling away from me a little, shocked. "Are you – why are you crying –"

I swat at him, laughing a little. "What! Hormones! I'm tired! Leave me be." Then I brush the tears off my cheeks, smiling despite them. I'm just overwhelmed and grateful, honestly, for all the love that our family has shown our baby. "It really is a beautiful tradition," I murmur, and Sinclair kisses my cheek before moving away to talk to some of the Alphas who have come to see their new prince.

As Sinclair moves away, Isabel quickly moves to my side to take his place. "Hi, mama," she says, giving me a warm smile as she wraps an arm around my waist. "How are you doing?"

"Forget about me!" I cry out, wrapping my arms around her again, "how are you? How are James, and Sadie?"

"They're good," she says, but the way she smiles at her mate across the room lets me know that her words are an understatement. James raises a hand to me, little Sadie slumped against his shoulder, deeply asleep.

"Do you want to put her upstairs in one of the guest rooms?" I ask Isabel quickly, taking her hand and squeezing it. "You can stay as long as you like –"

"No," she says, giving me a smile. "I'm so glad we could be here and meet the baby – but we both want to get home. We have...a lot of work to do there." Her face changes,

then, and I feel my stomach twist to see it.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, anxious, tugging her hand and urging her to tell me. She nods to a little love seat in the corner and I follow her there, Rafe’s little pram in tow, so that we are away from everyone and as private as we can be.

“Ella,” Isabel says, her voice soft and a little sad, “I know that you’ve been distracted – and there’s nothing wrong with that you’ve had such a hard pregnancy, and I know that the birth wasn’t easy on you either – you really shouldn’t have been paying attention to anything besides your body and Rafe and Sinclair – ”

“Please, Isabel,” I say, staring at her and tightening my hold on her hand, “please just tell me –“My stomach is roiling with guilt to think that I’ve neglected something when I could have helped.

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“It’s just...I don’t think that Sinclair has told you absolutely everything,” she says, “about how bad the refugee problem is now, after the last days of the war when you were away on the boat. It’s nothing that he’s done wrong – Sinclair has made so many strides – but we have more children than ever in our centers, and there are even mothers out there who are simply missing their children

My face goes pale at the idea and I flick my glance towards my sleeping baby. If I were ever separated from him by war – just, had no idea where he was, if he was cared for – my heart wrenches to think of it. Isabel notes my paling face, my eyes filling with tears.

“Please, Ella,” she says softly, anxiously looking to where Sinclair is standing. “I’m sorry maybe I shouldn’t have told you –”

“No,” I say, shaking my head and looking at her with a new determination on my face. “I need to know, Isabel -I’m getting strong, I need to do this sort of work. If Sinclair intends to lead these people, I don’t intend to stay home and be a happy little house wife while others suffer. I want to help.”

She nods, understanding. “I knew that you’d feel that way. That’s why I told you – not because ...well, Ella, if you’re still healing, you need to focus on yourself first. You can be so selfless you always put others ahead of yourself.”

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My heart softens and I take a deep breath, still worried but touched by my friend’s concern. She knows me so well. “Thank you, love,” I say, giving her a little smile. “I’ll take care of myself, and my family. But I’m going to help too. Can you tell me? Who is

the worst hit, where should I begin?"

"Well," she says, lowering her voice and looking around the room. "It's...complicated."

I frown at her, not understanding, but giving her the space to work through her thoughts.

"Ella," she says, more urgent now, "we both know that the right side won this war. That Damon would have worked to disenfranchise the humans completely, to enslave them if he could. Sinclair, we know, wants equal rights and peace – but there are people even on Sinclair's side who still have...complicated ideas about hierarchies between shifters and humans."

I nod, understanding her, remembering the councils during the war when even some of Sinclair's allies looked askance at the humans, at Cora, my own sister. I frown to think of it, to see some of those men in this room now. Sighing, I turn back to Isabel.

"I hear you – and I'm aware. It's something that I know Sinclair is working on but...old prejudices, they die hard. But, Isabel, what does that have to do with refugees?" I ask, confused.

She shrugs a little. "It just means that since the humans were less prepared for the war – it came out of the blue for them a little bit – that they don't have the resources that the wolves have to help their people in the aftermath. And there are some among shifter-kind who are eager to divert all resources towards shifters first, meaning..."

I let out a big exhale, both of exhaustion and understanding. "That the humans are getting the short end of the stick." Slowly, Isabel nods.

"In all areas," she says slowly, "and Ella," she bites her lip, looking me in the eye and perhaps not wanting to say it, "it means that...resentment is building. Humans feel lied to, and now that they know the truth, it in many ways seems like Sinclair has offered them peace but is not giving them the resources to survive their new reality."

My eyebrows fly up at this and I follow my knee-jerk reaction to defend my mate. "Sinclair is doing everything he

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"I know, Ella," Isabel says softly, leaning forward to put a reassuring hand on my knee. "I'm just saying, from the human's perspective? ...The trust is not there. They need help, and they need a reason to believe in Sinclair."

I nod, looking away from my friend and staring into space a little bit, trying to figure out what I can do next.

“Maybe,” Isabel suggests softly, “his mate, who was raised human for most of her life, and thought she was human until she conceived a wolf child, and who has a human sister...”

I turn back to Isabel, nodding slowly. “Perhaps I’m the link we need.”

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need your help. You I give my friend a warm smile and she squeezes my hand, a plan starting to form between us. Please stay,” I whisper to her, shaking my head a little. “I need you here could do so much good here, on my team.”

She sighs and looks towards James, considering. “I’ll talk to him,” she says, smiling at her mate and her little girl. “We’ll decide, together, what’s best.”

Chapter 307 – How Dare You?

Ella

My guests surprise me by staying almost until noon. Well, at least, some of them – mostly those who started hitting the mimosas hard when we got back to the house and then moved to whiskey.

After the baby wakes up and has a little lunch, I come yawning back into the front of the house, where I smile to see that Sinclair has loosened his tie and is enjoying a little banter with Roger and some of the other Alphas.

Isabel and James have gone, back to their hotel to let little Sadie sleep in peace, but Cora is still here, curled up on a couch and half dozing as Henry – I laugh to see him a little tipsy as well – tells her stories of his youth. I move over to them, tired but happy to see everyone enjoying themselves.

“How are you, Ella,” Henry asks, smiling at me warmly and peeking at the baby, who looks at him curiously when I hand him over.

“I am good, happy,” I say, grinning at both of them. “Though I wouldn’t say no to sometime soon –”

“Oh my,” Henry says, glancing up at the clock. “We’ve overstayed our welcome –”

my bed “No,” I say, appalled at myself for such a rude comment, “It wasn’t a hint – I’m sorry, stay

“No, Ella,” Cora says, laughing and standing up. “Henry is right, and so are you – it is late. Or early or...” she screws up her face in concentration, “whatever. Time to go home!”

We both give Henry a kiss goodbye before he hands my baby back to me and wheels towards the door. Cora leans in to give me a kiss goodbye as well, but I hold her close and whisper in her ear before she can pull away, the baby fussing a little to be smushed, just a bit, between us. “Cora, why didn’t Doctor Hank come today?”

She frowns at me, a little chagrined, as she stands straight again. “Well, did you invite him?”

“Of course I invited him,” I say, narrowing my eyes at her. But then I hesitate. “Or...” I slap my hand to my mouth, realizing... “Cora! I thought you were going to bring him! I didn’t send him an invitation because I assumed he would come as your plus one!”

She raises an eyebrow at me, a little offended. “Ella, Hank is not my boyfriend –”

“He’s not?!” I gasp. Then I scrape a frustrated hand down my face, confused. “Cora, if he’s not your boyfriend then what is he –”

“He’s whatever he is!” she hisses, looking around the room awkwardly in the hope that no one’s listening. I note that her eyes linger on Roger and put the pieces together.

“Cora,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “Hank told me that he wants to build a life with you

“What! When did he –”

“But if you’re stopping him because you’re holding a space open for someone else –”

“Ella! I thought you wanted me to –”

“I want you to be happy!” I interrupt, my voice raised in frustration. My words echo around the room a little bit and I blush, realizing that our little tiff is...well, not exactly private anymore. I take my sister by the shoulder and turn her towards the corner of the room.

“You’re starting to cross a line, Ella,” Cora says, glaring at me. “This is my life, and my business – and you’re getting in my head! Telling me you want me to be happy, and then telling me you want me to be with Roger, and then kind of yelling at me for not bringing Hank into a literal pack of wolves for a magical moonlight baptism!” Exasperated, Cora runs her hand through her hair. “I don’t even know what I want anymore, Ella, because you’re too busy telling me what you want!”

I inhale deeply through my nose, glaring back at my sister but...well, hearing her. “I just want the best for you, Cora,” I say back to her, a little mad. “And I thought that you decided that that was Hank! But if you’re still keeping space for Roger...” I turn my glare on the back of his head now, angry again. “What happened out in those woods? Did he say something to you? Did he did he kiss you?”

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“Ella,” Cora says, taking me by the shoulders and giving me a little shake, though I can see a blush on her cheeks. “Let it go.”

“Fine,” I lie, still frowning at her. Cora sighs and shakes her head. “I’m tired, Ella,” she says, looking towards the door and then back at me. “I’m going home, but I don’t want to leave it this way. It was a great night – really ...special. Can we just tell each other we love each other, and then go take much-needed naps?”

“Yes,” I sigh, my eyes softening as I pull my sister close to me. “I’m sorry, Cora, you’re right. I’m – I must just be over-tired. It’s been a big night.”

“You did amazing,” Cora murmurs to me, and then bends to kiss the baby’s head before squeezing my hand and heading for the door, stopping to say goodbye to some people on the way out. I watch my sister go, feeling guilty for bothering her about it but...

Well. I’m still mad. And I know exactly who to take it out on.

Conveniently, Roger backs away from the group of Alphas with whom he’s been talking, heading to the little bar we set up to refill his drink. I intercept him on the way.

“You stay away from Cora – “I say, stepping in front of him and pointing a finger in his face.”

I know what happened between you two tonight” – that’s a lie, but he doesn’t know that and I think you’re being rotten to her, Roger “What?” Roger says, blinking at me, completely shocked. “Ella, I –”

“I’m serious, Roger!” I say, my anger getting deeper when he doesn’t immediately comply with my demands. I hold my baby tight against my chest as I take another step towards him. “ That’s my sister you’re messing with, and I’m not going to let you break her heart more than you already have –”

“Ella!” Roger snaps, swatting away my finger, which, I admit, is coming dangerously close to his face. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about!”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Don’t play dumb with me, Roger. You know she still has feelings for you – but if you have no intention of taking her seriously because she can never have your children, then you need to leave her alone. Let her go and be with someone who can appreciate her for the wonderful woman she is, whether or not she can give them children.”

I see something change on Roger’s face then. He goes a little pale, his jaw dropping, as if... well, as if I’ve spoken the inner secret that’s been nagging at his heart for weeks. I feel a little bitter, victorious smile pull at my lips.

“Ella,” Roger sighs, taking a step closer to me. “It’s more complicated than that – ”

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“It’s really not,” I insist, shaking my head at him, my eyes wide. “And as someone who for years was put down by her partner because she couldn’t have his kids for no fault of her own

Roger's face drops further as I say this, the guilt written obviously on his features now. He hadn't put it together before, I realize that what he's doing to Cora great deal in common with how Mike treated me before I met Sinclair.

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"I'm telling you right now," I continue, "to either love her for who she is and how she is, or leave her alone. But don't you dare drag her along just to break her heart, Roger Sinclair. If you do that, I'll tear you to pieces."

The last words are uttered through my bared teeth, and I mean every word of them. I'm so worked up that I don't even notice Sinclair come up behind me. "Ella," my mate says, stern. "You need to back off."

I spin on him, glaring up at his gigantic Alpha self. "What, are you going to tell me that I'm wrong?" I ask him, righteous. "Because if so, I say, looking between the two of them, my newborn baby still held tight against me, "I'll take on you both at once!"

Chapter 308 – Between a Brother and a Mate

Sinclair

I know it's a little perverse, but, as I look down at my furious little spitfire mate, glaring angrily between my brother and I who outweigh her by three or four times...

God damn it, but I get a little hard. She's just so passionate, and when she's all worked up like this all I want to do is grab her, carry her upstairs and redirect that anger to-

"Ella," Roger sighs, looking down at his feet. "I'm – I don't know what to say." "Damn right you don't," she growls, spinning on him and starting to advance on him again.

"Enough," I groan, reaching for her arm – the one without the baby – and wrapping my hand firmly around it. She turns and looks up at me, a little snarl on her plump lips, but when she sees the coolness on my face and in my eyes Ella hesitates, just a little. And then she huffs, relenting against her will, her expression reflecting the words she sends directly to my mind:

Fine. But you're going to pay for this later. I smirk at her, letting her feel a little of my arousal down the bond. Oh baby, I say back, I'd better.

I see her lips twitch with amusement, but not enough to quell her anger totally. She turns back to Roger then and I let go of her arm, trusting her to contain herself.

"I'm sorry, Roger," she says stiffly, making him look up at her in surprise. "I meant what I said but...I understand it's complicated. And this wasn't the time or the place." Ella gives a little shrug then, clearly communicating that she's sorry that she's really not very sorry, but still ending the fight.

"Okay," Roger says awkwardly. "Um," my brother looks up at me, shame and regret in his eyes. "I think I'm going to go..."

"Stay," I say, meaning it, taking a step towards him. "Stay overnight, at least – we've got plenty of room –

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"No," he says, giving us a little half-smile as he looks between us. "It's all right – I'm not far, and all I really want to do is be in my own bed." He gives a fake yawn, stretching his arms over his head.

"All right," I say, putting my hands in my pockets and studying him. "Thank you, brother, for everything."

“Anytime,” he murmurs, coming forward to give me a hug and then dipping down to give Ella an awkward kiss on the cheek and to chuck baby Rafe under the chin. “See you guys around,” he murmurs, clearly lost in his thoughts as he heads for the door.

Noticing that both of the godparents are gone now, the rest of our guests quickly get the message and spend the next few minutes saying their goodbyes. I see the last few out the door as Ella takes the baby upstairs to lay him down.

I stand at the bottom of the staircase after everyone is gone, sighing and delaying going upstairs as long as possible. Because I know that the minute we get up there? We’re going to have to have this fight.

Sighing, shaking my head, I start up the stairs. She’s ready for me when I come into the room. “How could you not back me up on this, Dominic,” Ella says, standing next to the baby’s bassinet with her arms crossed.

“Ella,” I say, leaning against the door frame and covering my eyes with my hand. “It’s not that I don’t back you up.

“But you didn’t!” she insists, and I can hear in her voice that she’s still furious. I sigh, tired, but I try not to let her see my frustration. She’s entitled to her emotions on this point, and I don’t want to invalidate how she feels. “You told me to stop,” she continues, “you took his side!”

“No,” I disagree softly, evenly. “I didn’t take his side – I just asked you to stop, because we had other guests, and I didn’t want to make Roger and Cora’s business everyone’s business.”

“Is that what you’re saying I was doing?” Ella asks, getting steamed again. She opens her mouth to say more, but I cross the room to her quickly.

“Ella,” I say, placing my hands evenly on her shoulders and looking into her face. “Please. I know you’re upset. But please, you know that’s not what I meant. Right?”

She pauses a moment and I see her check herself. I can’t help but smile at her, loving the ferocity with which she protects the people that she loves. I open this feeling to her down the bond, letting her see how I really feel, that I don’t hold it against her.

Ella bends, then, a little bit, sighing and tripping forward to lean against me. I wrap my arms around my angry, hard-loving little mate, holding her close, curling my body around her protectively. As much as she loves and fights for those she loves, I’m there, right with her, protecting her just as fiercely.

“You know I’ve always got your back, Ella,” I murmur, tucking my face against her hair. “I

know, Dominic," she sighs. "I just got...mad. I'm sorry I took it out on you." "I can take it," I reply, smirking a little. "Plus, you're really sexy when you get all worked up like that."

"What!?" she replies, looking back at me with shock and a little bit of pleasure on her face Seriously?"

"Sure," I say, running a hand over her pretty rose-gold hair. "The sight of you taking on two Alphas like that, looking like you were ready to take us both out at the knees with a baby on your hip? Damn, girl." My last two words are a lusty snarl. "I'm going to be thinking of that look on your face for a loooong time."

Ella smiles at me and presses her body against mine, pulling me close and turning her face up towards me. "Okay, now tell me I was right. That's what will get me all worked up."

"You were right," I whisper, hoisting her up into my arms. She laughs and wraps her legs around my waist.

"Oh baby, say it again," she murmurs to me, her words a throaty whisper. But I just laugh and kiss her neck, running my lips down her shoulder and over the mating mark I left there not too long ago. I feel a little shiver travel through her as I run my tongue over it as well.

"How long to we have to wait?" she asks, her voice a little breathy. "Doctor Hank said three weeks. Half the time as the wait after a human pregnancy."

She sighs. "So, one more to go. But still, thank the goddess for this wolf biology. I don't think we'd have made it to six."

I shrug, smiling at my little mate and letting my hand rove over her ass. "We'd have found ways to be creative."

"But I don't want to be creative," she whispers, smiling at me and nudging my nose with hers. "I just want you. Pure and simple."

I kiss her again, slowly, deliberately not giving her all of myself. I don't think that I could stand...well. Let's just say, I don't want to get myself all worked up, when I know I can't get her all worked up as well. Then, I carry her over to the bed and sink down into it, laying down with her on top of me.

Chapter 309 – the Note

Ella

I sigh and spreads my body out against Sinclair's, tracing the lines of his body beneath his clothes. I close my eyes, relaxing, letting myself feel the warmth of him, basking in the joy of having him safe and healthy and near, of the knowledge that our baby boy is asleep on the other side of the room. "You do agree with me though, right?" I ask quietly. "All jokes aside?"

Sinclair takes a minute to consider and then he nods, his eyes still closed. "I think they should sort it out themselves," he answers quietly. "But I agree, Ella – if he's not willing to take her whether or not she can give him children...he should let her find someone who will."

"Thank you, Dominic," I respond, my voice barely audible, sending a little pulse of sincere gratitude down our bond. He sends love back. And then we both relax, our bodies falling into a deeper rhythm of breathing that carries us near sleep.

Sleep that's interrupted, suddenly, by the sound of the doorbell below. I groan, pulling my head up off of Sinclair's chest. "Who the hell could that be."

"Probably someone who forgot a purse. Or a shoe. Or...whatever," Sinclair mutters, working to sit up. I rise too, letting him up, smiling at my sleepy mate who is so tired that his words aren't making much sense. He sighs, rising to his feet, and I get up with him.

"Stay," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder, nodding back to the bed. "No," I sigh. "I'll come with you. It's probably for me, anyway. A package or something." I'm rueful, suddenly, that we've let all of the staff have the day off after the long night. It would be nice to have someone else to answer the door...

...but then I realize that that's horribly selfish and privileged, and I take my mate's hand, tugging him towards the door and grabbing the baby monitor on the way, switching it on. Who have I become, really, that I'm turning my nose up at having to answer my own door?

Considering some of the conditions I've lived in previously in my life, I should be thanking my lucky stars that I even have a door. Frustrated with myself, I hurry down the stairs, Sinclair following steadily behind.

When I pull open the door, though, there's nobody there. Frowning, I look around, and then down at the doormat, where there's a little folded piece of paper.

"What's this?" I ask, bending quickly to pick it up, the baby monitor making little static noises in my left hand.

I hold it up between me and Sinclair as he frowns at it, looking quickly around the neighborhood before pulling the door shut, obviously on alert.

“Is it addressed to anyone?” he asks quietly, suspicious. “No,” I say, my curiosity growing with every step. Quickly, I turn the envelope over and begin

to slip my finger beneath the seal when Sinclair grabs my hand. “Ella” he says, his voice harsh with worry. “Don’t.”

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“What?” I ask, looking up at him, suddenly worried myself. “Why?”

He shakes his head at me. “I just...it’s strange. Let’s...treat it carefully. All right?” “Okay,” I say. He holds his hand out and I place the letter in his open palm.

“Come on,” he says, taking my hand and heading for the kitchen. I follow eagerly, desperate to know, a little knot of anxiety forming in my stomach.

When we get into the kitchen, Sinclair puts a hand on my shoulder, walking me backwards until my back is pressed against the door of the pantry. “Stay here,” he murmurs, still looking down at the letter, and then he crosses swiftly to the butcher block by the sink.

“Sinclair,” I call, holding the baby monitor tightly between my hands. “Why “Precautions,” he responds, concentrating on the note. Then, he carefully places it on the butcher block and grabs a knife, moving his body away as far as he can as he begins to carefully slice the sticky seal holding the envelope shut.

“What,” I say, laughing a little desperately, wanting to make light of it – hoping, needing him to be overreacting right now “do you think it’s going to explode or something?”

He doesn’t answer me, just slowly finishes slicing the seal. When nothing happens, he stands up straight.

“What is it?” I whisper, my anxiety keeping me absolutely on edge. My heart is racing now –

“Just, one more minute, Ella,” Sinclair murmurs, holding up a hand to keep me back. I can’t take my eyes off of him as he steps closer to the envelope, holding it carefully in his hands and turning it upside down, shaking it to see what falls out.

But only a piece of paper falls out of the envelope, clattering lightly against the wood.

Sinclair takes a minute to pród at the piece of paper with his knife, flipping it over, making sure there's nothing strange about it, and then he stands up straight and steps closer to the butcher block, his shoulders relaxing.

"It's just a note," he says, looking over to me, confused. "Oh my god," I breathe out, relieved, rushing to his side. "You had me going crazy, Dominic," I say, glaring at him a little as I wrap my arms around him and peer at it. "What does it say?"

He shrugs a little bit and flips open the note, revealing a hurried scrawl of handwriting inside – just a few lines. We both read it hurriedly.

And then I blink, the blood draining from my face as I read it again, horror racing through my veins. I'm sorry – This is coming too late – but I had to do what is right They are coming for him for the little baby –

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The ones who made him, who planned for him to be born –

They're coming I'm sorry My face snatches up to Sinclair's, my breathing short – I can barely pull air into my lungs as I panic –

Sinclair's face is still with rage as he reads the note again and again and then crumples it in his fist, which he slams down on the butcher block.

"Oh my god," I whisper to him, my whole body shaking. "Dominic – who. "The baby," he growls, spinning towards the door.

And then I gasp, and look down at the monitor in my hands, clicking the buttons – hearing nothing but static – but also seeing – seeing nothing. "Oh my god," I wheeze, my breath leaving me completely as I whip my eyes up to Sinclair's face. "The baby –"

My mate tears away from me, launching himself towards the SUS. I scurry behind, pulsing my limbs as hard as I can, taking the steps two at a time –

But my mate is too fast for me, quickly outstripping me as he pounds up the stairs, a snarl on his lips, death on his teeth for anything – anyone – he might meet that poses a threat to our child –

I'm half a hallway behind when Sinclair rips into our room, a roar on his breath as he goes. When I arrive, gasping, at the door, I slam into the doorframe, unable to move any further as I watch my mate dash across the room towards the bassinet –

If anything, anyone has hurt my baby –

I hold my breath, watching my mate bend over the little white basket, looking for our son.
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Chapter 310 – Defense

Ella

Sinclair whips his face up to mine, relief in every line of it. “It’s fine,” he says, his body shaking with his unused adrenaline, “he’s...he’s here...he’s still asleep...”

A sob breaks from my throat as I press my eyes closed and sink to the floor, still clutching the door frame, unable to stop the tremors that run through my body. The past minute – the past thirty seconds, even – were some of the most horrible of my life –

The idea the bare idea that someone had come for my baby – my brand–new child, who I love so much, who I worked so hard to bring into this world –

I’m sobbing freely now, unable to catch my breath, panic overtaking me at the thought. I lean my head against the wood, pressing my face against it, unable to contain myself – to even think

to do anything but cry my heart out in fear, and panic, and grief and, relief at what I thought happened – but actually didn’t happen at all.

I barely feel Sinclair as he crouches next to me, his hand warm on my back, and it’s only when I hear Rafe’s little mew of unhappiness that I snap my face towards him. Sinclair is kneeling next to me, tears streaking down his own face, holding my baby out towards me – Rafe so small and precious that he almost fits in his father’s huge hand.

Desperate, I grab for Rafe, needing the corporeal reality of him against me. I cry harder then, but am able to take deep breaths as I hold my baby in my arms, pressing him against my chest, and running a shaking hand over his hair. He’s crying a little now too, his sleep interrupted –

“You” I say, my voice trembling as I look up at Sinclair, “you sh–shouldn’t have – woken – him up – ”

Sinclair shakes his head at me, his own lip trembling as he works to hold himself together. “You needed him more than he needed the sleep – we need him.

Sinclair lowers himself fully to the floor then, drawing me and the baby into his lap, wrapping his arms around us. I can feel his breath deepening behind me as I stare down at my child, shushing him, helping him to fall back asleep. It’s a long time before he does, but when he finally does, I take a deep breath and look back up at my mate. “What are we going to do?” I ask, bewildered, desperate.

“What we were always going to do,” Sinclair answers, his voice iron. “Protect our family.” He meets my eyes then, his green gaze glowing with ferocity. “No one will touch our son,

Ella," he promises. "You have my word on that. I'll die before I let anyone touch him."

Slowly, I nod, believing every word. Then, new resolve building in me, I take a deep breath and lift myself off of Sinclair's lap, standing up on shaky legs.

"Where is the note?" I ask, surprised by the solidity of my voice. "Here," Sinclair says, unfolding his fist which I think he's probably had clenched since he folded the note the first time.

"Do we," I say, sniffing a little and looking around the room. "Do we have enough security for this?"

"No," Sinclair growls, standing up as well and striding across the room to where his phone is on the bedstand. "I'll set that up now. Until then, Ella?" he says seriously. "None of us leave this room. Not once. We are all going to stay within each others' line of view until the security is in place. Is that understood?"

I nod, feeling a little better to hear the Alpha command taking root in my mate's voice. Then, I head back to Rafe's bassinet, moving slowly and deliberately. When I get there, I calmly lay my baby back down so he can get his rest, exhaling a deep breath as I stand up and smooth my hands over my dress.

—

whoever

I feel control return to me more and more as every moment passes. This person they are — they scared me, I'll admit it. But as I stare down at my child and hear my mate issuing commands into my phone, I reassure myself that whoever this is?

They've taken on the wrong people.

My child is the most precious thing to me in this world. My mate is the most powerful Alpha in the world, perhaps that's ever been born. And me?

Well. Let's just say they'd better be prepared to face the wrath of a goddess, if they ever want to take what's mine.

And this baby is mine.

Fifteen minutes later, the house is swarming with guards. I don't speak with any of them, letting Sinclair handle it. Instead, I sit in the armchair next to Rafe's bassinet, the basket pulled close to me, not letting anyone near us. My wolf inside me has her hackles raised, eyeing every person who passes the door to the room with her teeth bared, suspicious.

That one, she says to me, it's him –

it's him I know it is I know it is – didn't you see his shifty eyes?

I shush her, my teeth clenched, telling myself that Sinclair has clearly vetted our security team that he wouldn't let anyone in this house unless he had secured their loyalties years before.

Still – my wolf growls – someone got close enough to use to leave a note on our doorstep. How good could his security have been? Or, even if his security is as good as we think, what are the holes?

I nod, my wolf's anxiety feeding my own. Was it someone we knew, someone leaving the party? Was it a friend, someone we hold dear?

My mind spins in many different directions, all of them dark and twisted. Still, though my wolf claws inside of me, urging me to chase them all down, to lock the doors, I wait, patiently, for my mate to come into the room. My trust is in him – he will protect us. This, I know, in my bones.

Soon, my patience pays off, and Sinclair strides back into the room. "Ella," he says softly, looking me from head to toe, and then glancing at Rafe, still asleep in his bed. "Are you all right? Is he?"

"We're fine," I say simply, looking into his face and letting him know that even though I am not fine – far, far from it, in fact – that we're well enough that we don't need his direct concern. Sinclair reads this on my face and gives me a sharp nod. "Well?" I ask, all the joy and love that this day raised in me tamped deep down inside my heart. There is nothing left in me, right now, except grim determination. "What did you find out?"

"An old lead," Sinclair says, sighing and crouching down at my side. "An investigation we started months ago – that got lost in the war."

I cock my head to the side, curious. "Ella," he says, taking my hand, "do you remember? Back, in the early stages of your pregnancy, the investigation that I started into who switched the sperm samples in the first place?"

I blink, my mind instantly thrown back to what feels like another life. "We – we weren't even mated then. We weren't even...together. I was your...accidental surrogate..."

He nods, signing and looking down at the floor, clearly frustrated. "My team discovered that someone powerful was behind the switch – that it wasn't Cora, and it wasn't you, obviously, but that someone did switch the samples. Someone wanted you to get

pregnant with this child. With Rafe.”

I gasp, my hand going to my mouth as I suddenly remember. I can't believe that we let this slip.

“It's my fault,” Sinclair utters, grief and sorrow and self-ridicule in his voice as he raises his eyes to me and takes my hand. “I...I let it drop. I got distracted. And now...whoever it is that switched them...”

“They're coming to collect...” I breathe, clenching his fingers tightly in mine.

Someone

—

someone who knew my lineage, who knew me more than I knew myself – wanted me pregnant with this child, with Dominic Sinclair's child. And now that he's born?

They want him.

Chapter 311 – Cora at Home

Cora

When I wake up it's almost eight at night and I groan, realizing that my sleep schedule is completely wrecked. I'm reminded, suddenly, of my years as a medical resident when this sort of thing was normal – sleeping all day, taking night shifts, living moment to moment rather than a steady, scheduled life.

And quite frankly, right now? That sounds really wonderful, compared against a whole night of empty hours in which I have nothing to do but...think.

Think about what I'm doing in my life, think about my career which has gone in a really weird direction, think about my relationship...s.

About a certain kiss in the woods. About a sweet doctor who, apparently, wants to build a life with me.

I sigh and sit up, looking around at my sterile little apartment. I never really decorated, I realize as I look around at the grey and beige furniture, the simple linens, the charmless curtains. Everything is functional and high quality but none of it is...me?

Or is it? I frown at my space, thinking of Ella's sweet home that – even though Sinclair picked out most of the furniture before she moved in still sings Ella Ella Ella in every corner. It's warm and sweet and comfortable. What does my space say about me?

I mean, I'm an orphan – I never had any possessions or any control over the environments in which I lived, so where would I have learned to decorate? I never had a mother to show me how. So where did Ella....

I groan, rolling my eyes at myself, sick, again, of being jealous of my sister. I love her so, so much and I'm so happy she has what she wants in her life. But sometimes she's just so... perfect. That it makes me realize how unhappy I am, when I stand next to her.

I roll over, reaching for my phone, seeking some kind of distraction from these disquieting thoughts. But when I pick it up the first thing I see is one of those relationships I'm trying to avoid leaving me an assortment of messages. I sigh and click open my message app. Hank: Hey, Cora – how did the baptism go? Dinner later?

Hank: Cora? You okay? Hank: Hey, send me a text when you get up I know you were up all night but I'm worried that I haven't heard from you.

Sighing, I swipe the messages away and click through the rest of my phone, trying, determinedly, to not let it bother me that there's nothing at all from Roger. Not a peep. As I take a deep breath and check my email, another message from Hank pops up.

Hank: Hey, are you home? I'm...I mean, this is a little pathetic, but I'm outside. Can you let me in? I brought Chinese, in case you're hungry. If I don't hear from you I'll leave it on the table outside your apartment door...

My heart twinges a little bit when I see that. Hank. He's being so sweet and I'm ...well, I'm not being fair to him, am I?

Ella's right. I'm holding a space for Roger, one he doesn't even want – despite what might have passed between us last night, it doesn't change anything. And there's a man standing outside my door with mooshoo pork, dying to love me.

God, what's wrong with me? Quickly, I jump out of my bed and dash for the front door of my apartment.

When I get to it, I yank it open, hoping Hank jumps a little, his eyes going wide, accidentally dropping the large bag of Chinese on the little mail table I keep outside my door. "Gah!"

"Hi!" I say, bright, cheerful – maybe too bright, too cheerful. "I'm so sorry, I continue, smiling at him, "I just woke up – we were up all night. It's I'm very sorry. I should have texted before I fell asleep."

"It's okay," Hank says, giving me his rare, warm smile. "I get it – you had a busy night."

"Do you want to come in?" I ask, leaning against my door frame and gesturing towards my little apartment. "I am...well, I am starving."

"Sure," he says, his lips turning up a bit at the corner. "That sounds great, Cora."

As we sit on the house, the Chinese spread out around us on the coffee table, eating right out of the containers with the supplied chopsticks, Hank tells me all about his day. He held down the fort at the little free clinic we both work at, seeing both prospective mothers as well as general ailments from humans and wolves who currently don't have access to their regular healthcare providers.

It was, apparently, a busy day with some tricky cases. I watch Hank closely as he tells me his story, my eyes flicking over his handsome, serious face his thick brown hair – his strong, capable hands-

And I feel something twist in my stomach as I watch him, something that makes me... well, makes me want to jump across the couch and kiss him....

"Cora?" he asks, making me blink and focus on him. "Did you hear me?" "Hmm?" I ask,

shaking myself and forcing myself to listen to his words. Then, I grimace a little. "I'm sorry, Hank," I say, giving him an apologetic look. "I got...lost in my thoughts a little bit. Forgive me. Can you start again?"

"It's okay," he responds, giving me a little wink and reaching out to grab my hand, squeezing it a bit before sitting back. "I was just curious if you think Ella would want to be more involved in the clinic."

"I think she'd be dying to be more involved in the clinic," I respond instantly, looking down at my chicken with broccoli and picking up a morsel."

But she doesn't have any medical experience. Would she really be helpful there? I think that she would do anything – but she's got a big heart, and she's good with people – her skills might be lost on the small sort of administrative help we need most."

"I wasn't thinking about administration," Hank says, swirling some noodles around his chopsticks. And it's true that she doesn't have medical experience, but she does have... healing experience."

I cock my head at him, confused. "Or more precisely...healing powers," Hank clarifies quietly. "Our mother's gift?" I ask, raising my eyebrows at him.

He shrugs a little. "It was incredible, what she was able to do to herself twice now. To bring herself out of that coma that should have killed her. And then I saw her, before my eyes, almost instantly heal wounds that should have incapacitated her for days. If she were able to harness that power...Or, Cora," he says seriously, meeting my eyes now, "if you were able to harness that power..."

"Oh," I say, my mouth going to a little "o" as I lower the takeout to my lap. I had honestly never thought of it – of leveraging my mother's power for the practice of medicine. It seemed somehow...too sacred, too special, to be used to heal bumps and bruises. But could it, should it, be used to cure people on the edge of death, like Ella had been?

Could it be used to fight things like terminal cancer, or deadly wounds? My skin starts to tingle at the possibilities, but I'm wary. I mean, I gave the gift back to Ella – and our mother gave it to her in the first place.

It's hers to use as she wishes. But if I had it, would I use it differently than Ella might? "Sorry," Hank says softly. "Did I...was it wrong to suggest it?"

"No," I say, snapping my attention back to him. "Um, but it's a bigger question than just I can answer. We'll have to ask Ella."

"Well," Hank says with a smile, "now that she's feeling better, maybe we can have that

conversation soon. If the gift can truly heal...she could help a lot of people. Quickly.”

“Yeah,” I say, grinning at him, excited. “And it’s not like she’s got anything else on her plate at the moment.”

“Well, neither do we,” says Hank, pushing his takeout aside and moving across the couch to me, taking the container of food out of my hands and putting it on the table next to me. “At least, not for the next twelve hours or so, until we have to go to work.”

I laugh lightly as he moves his body over mine, bringing his face close to me and slipping a hand behind my back.

“Whatever shall we do?” I murmur, happy as I let Hank use that hand on my back to lay me flat on the couch. Then I close my eyes as Hank brings his mouth to mine.

Chapter 312 – Reinforcements

Cora

Hank and I are tangled in the sheets of my bed, talking softly to each other about nothing, when suddenly I hear a pounding on my door – a dangerous, feral, fervent sound.

“What the hell is that,” Hank gasps, sitting up and whipping his head to look towards the front of my apartment.

“I – I don’t know -” I stutter, fear racing through me. The pounding halts for a moment and we both sit there, frozen, not knowing what to do. Then, suddenly, a voice breaks through the silence.

“Cora!” it shouts, and my jaw drops a little because...well, because I know that voice. “Open the damn door, Cora!”

“Oh my god,” I murmur, standing up and wrapping my naked body in my sheets weirdly bashful in this moment. As I do, the pounding starts again. “Do you know who it is?” Hank asks, hurriedly getting out of bed and pulling his pants on.

“Yes,” I breathe, quickly switching the sheets for my robe hanging on the back of my door and then rushing through the living room. “It’s fucking...”

But Hank, standing at the doorway to my bedroom, sees for himself the moment I pull the door open. Roger’s fist is still raised as my door flies open, but he drops it as he glares down at me. “God damn it, Cora,” he growls, storming past me into the apartment, don’t you ever check your pho-

He freezes and goes silent, though, the moment he sees Hank standing in the doorway to my bedroom, pulling on his shirt. And then Roger turns slowly and looks at me, taking me in from head to toe in my bathrobe. He doesn’t say a word, rendered, apparently, speechless.

“What are you doing here, Roger?!” I hiss, filling the void that his silence left as I slamming the door shut and stalking forward to give him a shove. “You scared the hell out of us!”

“Cora, damn it,” Roger growls, snapping out of his shock and turning his attention to me as he blatantly ignores Hank. “It’s a crisis – Ella and Sinclair have been blowing up your phone for an hour -”

“What?!” I gasp, looking all over – and then finally spotting my phone, wedged between the pillows of the couch. I dash to it and grab it and see that Roger is right – that Ella has

been calling me for the past hour, as well as sending texts. I quickly flick through them, glancing at Roger as I do.

“What’s what’s this all about ” I stutter in fear, my heart suddenly in my throat. I can’t grasp the whole situation – but there’s something about Rafe, and kidnapping, and a note – “Is the baby-”

“He’s fine for now,” Roger growls, moving close to me and wrapping his hand around my upper arm, “but they need you. It’s something about the sperm bank, they think they want to talk to you about what happened that day-”

I look up at him, shocked. “What? The sperm months ago!?” “Yes!” he almost yells. “God, Cora, let’s go – – you can ask all of these questions in the car!”

I sense his fury, his worry and his impatience, but all it breeds in me is defiance. “Fine!” I shout. “God, Roger, give me ten seconds! Obviously I’m coming!” I rip my arm from his hand and glare at him as I move towards my bedroom door, giving Hank a not-too-gentle nudge back into the bedroom and closing the door behind us.

“What’s going on?” Hank asks, all steady cool and deliberation. I glance at him, my stomach warming. At least he’s good in a crisis. I hand Hank my phone as I move to my dresser. “Can you give me a summary of Ella’s texts as I get dressed? I can’t do both at once.”

Hank nods, brisk, and does as I ask, reading some of the texts aloud to me, skipping through the ones that he deems less important. Overall I get the gist and my heart wrenches to think of what my sister is going through as I hurriedly pull on some sporty leggings and a t-shirt. After all that she went through with the pregnancy, I had thought this was over for her –

“Cora!” Roger shouts, banging on my door, interrupting one of Hank’s readings. “Seriously!? What’s taking so long! Let’s go!”

“I’m COMING!” I shout towards the door, fed up with his impatience. “God damn Alpha bullshit...” I mutter as I pull on my sneakers, not bothering to tie the laces. Then, I stand up, tucking my hair behind my ears as Hank crosses the room to me and hands me my phone, lifting one hand to my face.

“That’s a pretty good summary of the messages,” he says softly, rubbing his thumb over my cheek and looking into my eyes. “Are you going to be all right? Is there any way I can help?”

“No,” I sigh, lifting my hand to cover his and shaking my head a little. ” Thank you, Hank, but -”

“Cora!” The yell and a single pound comes again and I realize, suddenly, that of course Roger has wolf hearing and is using it to spy on our conversation.

I glare at the door, hate in my eyes, but then I nod towards it. “Come on,” I say, moving away from Hank. “We’d better get moving before he rips it down.”

“I’m not going to rip it down,” I hear Roger growl, disgruntled, but I just roll my eyes and pull the door open.

“Ready?” I ask, breezing past him. “I’ve been ready,” he snarls, walking swiftly to keep up with me. We pass through the door together and then awkwardly wait for Hank to catch up.

“Thanks, Hank,” I say, giving him a smile as I lean down to lock my apartment door. “For the food and...the nice time.”

“Anytime, Cora,” he replies, and I can hear the smile in his voice even as I concentrate on my keys. “You’ll let me know how it goes?”

“Of course I will” I respond, turning towards him, but suddenly I’m almost yanked off my feet by someone grabbing my hand and tugging me with them.

“Oh my god,” Roger groans, hauling me away from Hank and down the hall. “Cora let’s go!”

“Let go of me!” I cry, smacking at his hand on mine, but it does nothing. I remember to turn and wave to Hank as we turn the corner towards the stairs. Hank awkwardly returns my wave as he watches Roger and I disappear.

Roger, predictably, does not let go of me and I almost have to jog behind him as he strides down the stairs and out to the parking lot where his car is still running.

“Is Rafe being kidnapped right now?” I ask, angry, moving fast towards the passenger seat when he lets go of my hand. “What’s the rush?”

“The rush,” Roger replies, glaring at me as he and I simultaneously sink into our seats and close the doors behind us, “is that our nephew is in danger, and our siblings want us there now.”

“Fine,” I reply, sneering at him a bit as I buckle my seat belt. “Drive on. Try not to get us killed on the way.”

Roger doesn’t reply, just peels out of the parking lot and heads down the dark road at

breakneck speed. I'm pinned back into my seat but am surprised to find that I'm not at all scared. Somehow, I trust Rodger's reflexes and his driving skills. I trust that he knows what he's doing. "God," Roger says, rolling down the window and huffing out a breath of disgust.

"What?" I ask, inclined to be angry but curious about what he hell could bother him now. He got me into the car in less than five minutes, didn't he? What could possibly be wrong?

"You smell like him," Roger growls, revulsion and...something else thick on his words. "He's all over you. Gross."

I stare at Roger for a second, appalled, and then I can't help the little smile that creeps onto my lips, despite everything.

"Don't be jealous," I murmur, my words barely audible as I turn to look out the window and watch the scenery pass. But with that wolf hearing? I know he hears me. And I see the effect of my words in the window's reflection as I watch him flinch.

Chapter 313 – Sister Support

Ella

“Ella!” I hear my sister’s voice cry the same moment I hear the front door to the house open. I stand quickly from my seat in Sinclair’s office, Rafe awake and peaceful in my arms, and move to the open doorway.

“Cora!” I call. I see her spin away from the living room where she was looking for me and jog down the hall towards me, Roger closing the house’s main door behind him as he enters as well. Cora takes my shoulders in her hands as soon as she gets close.

“Are you – are you all right?” she gasps, looking me over, and then looking down towards the baby. I can see a little relief come into her face the moment she sees us both before her, intact and safe.

“We’re okay,” I say, giving her a little smile. “For right now,” we’re okay. Thank you for coming so late at night.” My sister snaps her eyes up at me, frowning a little.

“What?” I ask. “I just...” she says, confused, glancing back at Roger, “I didn’t expect you to be so calm.”

“Well, it happened like, eleven hours ago,” I say, raising my eyebrows at her. “We’ve had some time to process and plan – ”

Suddenly she scowls, turning fully to glare at Roger coming down the hall towards us. “The way this one was pounding on my door, flying around like a bat out of hell – ”

“More like a bat into hell,” he mutters, his frustrated expression matching Cora’s. “It wasn’t exactly peaceful heading into your apartment, which smelled like wonton soup and -”

“Oh shut up,” Cora huffs, narrowing her eyes at Roger and then turning back to me. Roger opens his mouth to retort but I reach out and give him a little shove and turn to my sister. Clearly in a mood, Roger just shakes his head and goes into the office, where Sinclair is still talking to some of the investigators.

“Ella,” Cora continues when he’s gone, “why didn’t you text me earlier if this happened hours ago? There wasn’t anything on my phone when I woke up from my nap at 9 – and then all of a sudden Roger’s pounding on my door – ”

“It’s complicated,” I say, hesitating and looping my arm with Cora’s at the elbow, pulling my sister close because I know what I’m about to say is going to piss her off. “Sinclair brought in his

team of investigators – the ones who were working on the question of the switched sperm sample before the war and they wanted to...clear you. Before I was allowed to text you.” “Clear me?” Cora asks, confused..

“Yeah,” I say, my mouth pulling into a grimace. “As a...suspect.” “WHAT!?” My sister shouts, her voice ringing out through the house. Rafe flinches and starts to cry, still cuddled in my arm.

“Cora!” I sigh, giving her an exasperated look as I unloop my arm from hers and work to settle the baby, bobbing him in my arms. “Obviously Sinclair and I don’t suspect you! But his team needs to be thorough, and you were the last one who we know had the sample! It makes sense, from an investigative standpoint!”

“I can’t believe I was a suspect! After everything!” Cora says, her voice softer now, but no less angry.

“You were a suspect for like, three hours,” I reply, rolling my eyes and wishing to mollify her because, honestly, it was more like six hours. ” And obviously you were cleared! So!” I shrug and look at her pleadingly, ” maybe move on from it!”

My sister brings both of her hands to her face and covers it, taking a minute to breathe in deeply and then exhale. Then, slowly, she pulls her hands down her face, tucking them beneath her chin in two fists, a gesture I remember from our childhood when she was truly upset.

“You know I would never hurt you, Ella,” Cora says, her voice as pleading as it is insistent. “Cora,” I say, shaking my head at her, my eyes wide with apology. “You know that I know you have nothing to do with this just...please, let it pass.”

“It’s true, Cora,” Sinclair says, peeking out from the office. “Forgive my investigators – they were just following process and being thorough.”

Cora sighs and I see that she understands. “Okay,” she says, nodding. “I get it. But, what can I do now?”

“We need to go back to that day,” Sinclair says, his hands in his pockets as he slowly walks over to us. “You have more knowledge of it than the rest of us – you were there. We’d like to see if you remember anything from that afternoon that could help.”

“I mean,” Cora says, running a hand through her hair. “Of course – se – I’ll tell you everything. But don’t your investigators have the notes?” Cora asks, confused, “from the last time we talked? I told you everything I know.”

I give my sister a wide, too-eager smile. “Well...” I say, my voice wheedling as I passes

the baby to Sinclair and take both of Cora's hands. The baby calms almost instantly in Sinclair's arms. "How do you feel about...trying a little recreational drug common in Vanara!?"

Cora's face drops along with her jaw. "Are you serious? Ether?" she asks, awed. "Do you – you want me to do hypnosis?"

"It's not bad!" I insist, that too-big smile still pasted on my face. "It just makes you remember! And then you're just a little hungry afterwards, that's all!"

Cora opens her mouth but she's interrupted by a knock at the door. I look up at Sinclair, who nods to me, handing the baby back and going to answer it himself. After all, if someone is coming to take our baby they're going to think twice when they realize that they have to go through my gigantic mate to get him.

And also, they probably wouldn't knock politely on the front door. Cora and I watch interestedly as Sinclair opens the door and peeks out, and then opens it wide. "Leon!" Sinclair says warmly, inviting the doctor in with a warm handshake. "Thank you so much for coming out so late at night."

"You brought the hypnotist in?" Cora whispered to me, awed. "From Vanara?" "He was already here," I respond dismissively, waving my hand. Sinclair had him flown over weeks ago, he's on call. "For what!"

"Whatever hypnosis needs crop up," I say, looking at my sister, surprised at the question. Isn't it obvious?

Cora crosses her arms. "Do you seriously think that's necessary?" she asks, raising an eyebrow. "Well," I say, waving around at the house, indicating our current situation. "Aren't you glad he did?!"

Cora groans a little and sighs. "Well, sure, she says, "I'm glad you'll get your answers, Ella, but I have to say that I'm not looking forward to having to take drugs to do it. You know I don't like mind-altering things."

"It's okay," I reply, moving close to my 'sister and giving her a little nudge with my shoulder. "It's not so bad. You know I appreciate this, right?" I ask, looking into my sister's eyes, needing her to understand that I'd never ask unless it was necessary.

"Duh, Ella," she says, crossing her arms and sighing. "Obviously I'll do it – anything for you. But I'm allowed to wish other methods were possible."

"Thank you," I say, coming close to give Cora a little kiss and then taking her arm and

pulling her towards the kitchen. “Now come on, let’s go pick out some snacks for after. I’ve got some really good ones...”

Chapter 314 – Ether Confessions

Ella

“I really must insist,” Leon says awkwardly, looking around at the packed guest bedroom, “that we...thin the crowd. Just a bit.”

“Well, I’m not leaving,” I say, stepping forward and bouncing Rafe in my arms as I look down at my sister laying on the bed. Cora is awkward and uncomfortable as she looks around at the collection of investigators, at Roger, at me, Rafe, and Sinclair, all standing around her. Leon sits primly squeezed into a chair at her side.

“Perhaps...the child?” Leon suggests and I sigh, realizing that he’s right. I turn to Sinclair, my eyes pleading. “Can you?” I ask. Sinclair blanches at me. “Ella – I have to be here to hear this ”

“Please,” I say, stepping towards him.” Maybe we can...like, is there a way to make a video feed? Or sound? So you can hear in another room?”

Leon’s eyebrows go up. “That would work,” he says, looking at Sinclair, who nods firmly, reaching out for Rafe.

“I owe you,” I whisper to him, standing on my toes to give him a kiss on the cheek and handing the baby to him. “I can’t leave her.”

“I understand,” Sinclair murmurs back, “I’ll send someone up with AV equipment in a few minutes.” He brushes my cheek with his thumb before signaling to the investigators to leave the room with him. I turn back to my sister and then blink when I see Roger still standing in the corner, his arms crossed.

“What are you still doing here?” I ask, surprised. Roger just stares at me for a moment, apparently appalled that I would ask. “I’m the lead investigator on this, Ella!” he informs me, frustrated, throwing out an explanatory hand. “I need to be here! To ask questions! To guide the investigation!”

“Ooooookay!” I say, putting my hands up placatingly. “I just didn’t know lead investigators were usually so pissy.” “Pissy!” Roger gasps, leaning forward to me, aghast. “Ella, I -”

“Roger,” Leon says, holding up a hand towards him. “We need a calm environment for this to work, and your level of agitation is...non-conducive.”

Roger stares at Leon, his mouth open, shocked to have been put in his place so politely. “Yeah,” Cora says, grinning at Roger and wrinkling her nose at him. “So, in other words, stop being so pissy.”

Roger stares between us for a moment and then leans back against the wall with his eyes closed, taking a deep breath and raising a hand to press the bridge of his nose between his fingers. Sisters..." he mutters, "I am never again spending any time at all with... sisters."

A younger member of Sinclair's team enters quietly then, nodding to me and beginning to set up a computer and a microphone on Cora's far side. He works quickly while Roger composes himself and Leon prepares the ether shot. I sit down on the end of the bed, putting a hand on Cora's ankle – the only thing near enough for me to touch and mouth "thank you" to her.

She sighs and leans her head back on the pillow, nodding to me and accepting her fate.

"Now Cora," Leon says, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder that makes her flinch. I grimace, knowing how tense she is about this. "I know that you're aware of some of Ella's experiences with hypnosis, but everyone's journeys are a little different. I'm going to give you the shot, and then I'll guide you back to your memories of that day. You'll hear my voice, and then, when you've accessed your memories, Roger will join me in asking you some questions. Is that all right?"

"Can I stop whenever I want?" Cora asks, looking anxiously up at the doctor. "If I get... scared?"

"Yes," the doctor assures her, tightening his hand a little on her shoulder. "The antidote is right here. We will stop whenever you'd like. And if you'd like to give permission to your sister as well, we can stop whenever she gives the word as well, if she sees that you are in distress. Would you like to give your sister permission for that?"

Cora nods eagerly and looks at me for confirmation. I slowly bob my head, letting her know that I've got her back, as I always do.

"All right then," Leon says, smiling around at Cora and Roger and me. Then let's get this started, nice and easy."

Cora exhales a deep breath and closes her eyes again. She doesn't flinch at all as Leon presses the needle to her arm, though I suppose that is normal, as she's a doctor who gives injections all day long.

I see Cora's eyes start to flicker, though, a little behind her eyelids as the ether takes over and she quickly enters a dreamy half-awake state. I watch her, curious, wondering if I looked the same under Leon's care. His eyes also on Cora, Roger comes and sits next to me on the bed, wanting to be closer to the action. I give him a warm little nudge of my shoulder, both in welcome and apology for teasing him a few minutes earlier. I'm

glad he's here.

"Hello Cora," Leon says quietly after a few minutes. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm just fine," she says, a peaceful smile on her face. "Where are you?" he asks. "I'm at my apartment," Cora replies, her voice carefree. I blink, surprised. This is indeed different than my own hypnotic states.

"Ah," Leon says, nodding and taking a little notepad out of the bag at his side, starting to write a little. "And is this a happy place for you?" Cora shrugs and makes a noncommittal noise. "Eh. I'd rather be at work."

"Do you like work, Cora?" I see my sister nod and smile, my heart warming to see her happiness. "I like to be helpful," she says, her voice breezy. "And busy."

"That is lovely, Cora. Why don't you go to work now, and tell me when you're there." There's a pause and then Cora nods. Leon continues. "What day is it, Cora?" he asks, his voice gentle. "It's today," she says, almost as if Leon is stupid for asking. "Duh." I bite my lip to hold back a little laugh.

"Well today is very dull isn't it," Leon says, his voice peaceful, soothing, and persuasive. "Let's go back a little bit in time. To that day, a few months ago, when your sister came to you and you helped her conceive her little baby. Can you go there?"

Cora inhales a deep, peaceful breath and then a few moments later exhales it. "All right," she says, her voice humming now with contentment and ease. "Ella is coming soon. I am excited."

"Go ahead, Cora," Leon encourages, and I shift my gaze to him, interested to see the different way that he's handling my sister's hypnosis. He took a much more hands-off approach when I was in his care, but I can see that his careful guidance here is really precisely what Cora needs. I smile at him, pleased that Sinclair had the forethought to bring him onto our team. "Tell us what is happening," Leon continues.

"I'm preparing the sample," Cora reports, a happy little smile on her lips. "We keep them onsite frozen in liquid nitrogen. We had...several vials of this patient." She yawns a little, relaxing more deeply into the memory. "But I'm just taking out one."

"And were you quite careful, Cora?" Leon asks, his voice more curious than accusatory. "To ensure that it was the sample from the donor that Ella selected?"

"Oh yes," Cora murmurs. "No mistakes there. Donor 284726. I can see it on the vial as well as on the paperwork. It's the right one." My eyes raise, interested to see that under hypnosis she can remember such details.

“What’s next, Cora?” Leon prods, still calmly taking notes on his sheet. “I take it into the lab for thawing to room temperature,” she murmurs. Then, I will check it for motility to ensure that the specimen is viable.”

“Is that what you’re doing now?” Leon asks. “No,” Cora replies with a happy little sigh. “No, I can’t. Because there’s someone already in the lab,” she replies, content. My blood runs cold at her words, as I realize that this is a detail she didn’t tell us before.

“Who is it?” Leon says calmly, as if Cora just told him she saw a pretty bird and he’s asking what color its feathers were. His voice betrays none of my shock and anxiety.

“A priest,” she murmurs. “A priest?” Leon continues. “What kind of priest – a catholic priest? Or a priest of the goddess?”

“No,” she murmurs, shaking her head as if that’s a silly suggestion. “No, this one’s robes are like the goddess robes. But they’re all black.”

Chapter 315 – Determination

Ella

I gasp and quickly reach out my hand to clasp Roger's. I feel that he is just as tense as I am as we both sit on the end of the bed, staring at Cora.

Leon flicks his gaze to me and gives me a very subtle shake of his head and a tiny frown. It's a small gesture, but the meaning is clear: I absolutely must not disturb Cora's state. As a precaution, I raise a hand to my mouth and cover it, knowing that in the upcoming moments I may hear details that make me react involuntarily.

Roger squeezes my other hand tightly as Leon continues. "Cora," Leon continues, curious. "I admit that I am intrigued by this man, this priest. Can you tell me more about him? What details do you remember?"

"It's...hard," Cora says, and I see her brow ruffle. "He...he didn't want me to remember." "That's very frustrating," Leon continues, his voice like honey. "Just tell me what you see."

"He's tall," Cora says, her frown deepening. "He has pale skin and dark hair...he's not old, but not young. His robe is black." She gives a little shrug and huffs a sigh through her nose. I can see that she's frustrated, even in her hypnotic state.

"That's all right, Cora, that's wonderful detail," Leon says soothingly. I hear Roger's mouth pop open and snap my head to him, but Leon holds up one finger towards us, begging patience while he continues. "What happened next, my dear?" Leon asks.

"He told me," she says, sighing, "to destroy the sample in my hand – to wash it down the sink, and then discard the vial. And then, once I did that," she sighs, almost peaceful again, "he had me go to the other freezer – the one with the shifter samples – and to take out number 7285692. So I did. And then I prepared that, and tested it for motility, and when it was ready," she shrugs, "I went into the exam room and helped Ella."

"Thank you, Cora," Leon says smoothly, smiling at her. "That is wonderful detail. You've remembered it all so beautifully." Then, he turns to Roger and nods, giving him permission to take control of the investigation.

"Cora," Roger says, releasing my hand and crossing his arms over his chest. "Can you hear me?" "Roger?" she asks, her eyes still closed. "What are you doing here in my lab?"

"I'm just...visiting..." he says awkwardly, clearly not very good at the kind of play acting that Cora's hypnosis requires.

"You're not allowed to be back here," she says, frowning.

Roger scoffs a little, as if remembering that she had no protests about a strange man in black robes who apparently took control of her will and made her switch sperm samples before inseminating me. I give Roger a hard nudge with my elbow and when he turns to me I give him a stern frown, clearly communicating that he needs to be nice to my sister. This was, after all, not her fault.

Roger sighs and nods, agreeing to my terms. "Cora," he continues, "what did the priest say to you before he left? Did he ask you to...forget anything? Or do anything special with the sample?"

"No," she says, turning her head to the side and considering. "He simply...took my hands, before I went, and there was a white light...and then he was gone. "And then you took the sample," Roger asks, "and you didn't know to whom it belonged?"

"No," she says, folding her hands in her lap, looking – if anything – a little bored. "I thought, at the time, that it was the right sample. I thought it was the donor."

"Very good, Cora," Leon murmurs reassuringly next to her. "You're doing wonderfully." A little smile comes onto her face.

"Cora," Roger says again. "Did you ever see the priest again?" he asks, after that day?"

"No," she says simply, with a little shrug. But then, a darkness passes over her face, and she frowns. Leon sits up, peering at her closely, and then looks at me, worried.

"Cora," I say, intuiting that Roger may have hit on something here but... perhaps, just asked the wrong question. "Ella?" she says, her voice a little scared.

"Yes, Cora, it's me," I say softly, quickly standing up and moving to her side, sitting back down on the bed and taking her hand. I'm probably blocking the remote investigators' view of Cora now, but I don't care. My sister is more important.

"Oh hey, Ella," she says, her voice wavering a little bit, afraid. "Cora," I say, as gently as I can. "You said you don't remember seeing the man in the black robe after that day.... but did you ever see him before?"

"Ella," my sister says, her lip starting to tremble. She turns to me, unseeing, and grasps my hand tightly. "Ella..."

"Cora," I say, worried, glancing between her and Leon, desperate. And then, my sister goes rigid with terror, her eyes flying open, and she tilts back her head and screams. Again and again – her screams are unending – she barely draws breath before

the next one begins –

“The antidote!” I shout, throwing my body across her, working to hold her, to keep her down. Leon, clearly startled, fumbles with the shot at her side, his hands shaking. But suddenly Roger is there, snatching it from his hands – leaning over and injecting Cora in the arm where Leon administered the first shot – and all the time she’s screaming, a sound of pure terror –

Roger’s leans over Cora now, reaching for her face, calling her name – and then slowly, so slowly, her screams subside, and she comes back to us.

“Cora,” I say, raising both of my hands to her cheeks as tears slip down her face. She looks at me, panting, starting to sob.

“Ella,” she cries, reaching for me, and I wrap my sister in my arms, climbing fully onto the bed so I can hold her close. Roger, panting with the anxiety of the situation, watches us for a second as the door behind him bursts open and Sinclair is suddenly there.

“Is she is she all right?” he gasps, moving briskly into the room, his team of investigators behind him.

“She’ll be fine,” I murmur soothingly, hoping desperately that I’m right. My sister looks at no one, her face buried against my shoulder as I slowly rub her back, rocking her. I make quiet shushing sounds, the same I make to Rafe when he’s having a hard night. It’s all I know to do in a moment like this- just to be soft, and quiet, and create a safe space for her to deal with whatever just happened.

“I’m I’m so sorry,” Leon says shakily, “it must have been a traumatic memory-”

“It’s all right,” I say quietly, both to him and to Cora. “It’s no one’s fault – it’s okay.”

Sinclair reaches out a hand and puts it warmly on Leon’s shoulder, nodding to him, letting him know that we don’t hold his practice to blame. Then Sinclair nods towards the door, suggesting that Leon can leave the room if he wishes, an invitation which Leon accepts with a shaky nod. I watch the two of them leave to join the investigators in the hall. Sinclair closes the door behind them to give us some privacy.

“Cora,” Roger begins, hesitating. I watch him as he puts a hand out to her shoulder, laying it softly there, a gesture which makes Cora flinch at first, but from which she doesn’t pull away. Then, he pushes. “Cora, what did you see?”

Cora gasps and curls hard against me, and I can feel her whole body go rigid as she turns away from the memory – whatever it is –

Clearly, she is not ready to share. “Go, Roger,” I growl at him, holding my sister tighter. “But we need to -”

“Go!” I snap, ready to tear him to pieces. It’s a bit of an unfair reaction, I know, but when my sister is upset like this? I’m not going to let anyone push her beyond her boundaries. Not for an instant.

“Ella,” Roger says warningly, frowning at me as he stands and sinks his hands into his pockets. He’s desperate, I know, to know more – which is his job, I remind myself. He’s trying to help – to answer important questions that will help me protect our child. I force myself to be more graceful than I feel. Like being in this current moment.

“Just...give us a second, Roger,” I say, meeting his eyes steadily, hoping he sees and recognizes the full complications of this moment, how torn I am, along with him. “Just give us a minute, okay?”

He sighs, but then nods. “All right. I...I hope...” then he sighs again, shaking his head. “I’ll give you two a minute.” And then he leaves the room, and I hold my sister until she cries herself out.

Chapter 316 – Safe?

Ella

Forty-five minutes later, I back out of the bedroom, snicking the door shut behind me. Then, I stand up, closing my eyes and exhaling a long breath. “Is she all right?” a voice hisses, right behind me.

I leap about a foot in the air, managing to muffle my shriek as I spin to see my mate standing about six inches from me, looking down with a worried expression. I smack him, hard, against the chest – more to get my adrenaline out than to actually hurt him – and glare up at him, mad at him for scaring me like that. Sinclair just blinks at me, waiting, my smack having had no effect on him at all.

“Back up,” I whisper, putting my hands on his wide, muscled chest and pushing backwards. “She’s asleep, finally where is the baby?”

“He’s here,” Roger says, standing at the end of the hall with his godson in his arms. I smile, a little, at the sight as I move forward with my arms open. Roger quietly passes my baby to me and I smile down at my son, something in my body that has been anxious without him in the same room as me finally coming to rest.

“Seriously, Ella,” Sinclair says, looking back towards the closed door of our guest room. “Is Cora okay?”

“I don’t know,” I say, looking towards the door anxiously. “Leon came back about ten minutes later, offering a sedative so she could sleep. I told him to give it as long as it wouldn’t give her bad dreams. Or any dreams.”

“Did she...say anything?” Sinclair asks, still facing the door. I frown up at him, a little annoyed by his singular focus on information. “You know she’s your sister too now, Dominic,” I snap, my own emotions a bit on edge. “You could show a little more concern for her welfare, and not just see her as a source of information.”

Sinclair swiftly turns his attention to me, anger and frustration immediately on his face, but then he softens. “I’m sorry, Ella,” he says, sincere. “I didn’t mean it like that. You know her health and safety are my first priority. I was just curious if you learned anything new.”

I sigh, stepping forward closer to my mate, leaning my body against him. “I’m sorry,” I murmur. “I was unfair.” “You’re tired, and stressed,” he murmurs against my hair. “You haven’t had any sleep in about forty- eight hours...”

“I’m going in with her,” Roger says suddenly, striding towards the guest room door. “Wha-“I start, but he turns to me with his hand on the knob, giving me a look so fierce it steals

the words from my mouth.

“I’m not going to do anything, Ella,” Roger bites out, his voice stern but with an undercurrent of strong emotion. “I’m just going to...be there, all right? In case she needs anything. You two go get some sleep,” he says, his face softening. “The house is guarded – Cora will be all right with me. Just... you need sleep. She needs someone to sit with her. It makes sense. Okay?”

I feel my eyes fill with tears at the sweet sincerity of my brother-in-law and, seeing them, Sinclair wraps an arm around my shoulder. “Come on, trouble,” he murmurs to me, nodding to Roger – who disappears into the bedroom and guiding me towards our – own room. “You’re overwrought – let’s get you down for a nap.’

“How can I sleep,” I gasp, my voice shaky, wiping a tear from my face. “How can I sleep when someone is coming for my baby – when my sister –

“You have to sleep,” Sinclair murmurs, ushering Rafe and I into the room and closing the door behind us. Then he takes me by the shoulders and moves me towards the bed, taking the sleeping baby from my arms and placing him in his basinet close to my side of the bed.

I cry out a little when my baby leaves my arms. “Just for a moment,” Sinclair murmurs, turning back to me and – to my surprise – beginning to undress me, tugging my shirt up over my head and arms and then sitting me down on the mattress, tugging off my leggings.

When I’m in my underwear he leaves me for a moment, disappearing into the closet and returning with a soft nightgown, which he slides gently over my head. That done, he quickly dips down, lifting Rafe and returning him to my arms.

“There now,” he says, kneeling down in front of me, which absurdly brings his head basically eye-level with mine. “You trust me, right?” he asks, and, sniffing, I nod vigorously. “And you know I’d never let anyone hurt or take Rafe, yes?”

Again, I nod. “Then, sleep, darling,” he says, lifting a hand to my face and gently cupping my cheek. “Because in a couple of hours, your baby is going to need you – and your sister – and your pack. You’ve got to sleep so you can be strong for them.”

My lip trembles a little in overwrought exhaustion then. A little part of me knows that Sinclair is talking to me like a child, and resents it, but a larger part of me...god, it needs it. It needs the simple reassurance, the warm reminder that – at my most basic level. – I am cared for, and safe.

Nodding to Sinclair and sending a burst of gratitude down our bond, I turn away from my

mate and tuck my feet in underneath the blankets, taking the baby with me. "Tonight he sleeps in the bed with us, okay?" I murmur, laying the swaddled baby down flat on the mattress between where Sinclair and I sleep. I move all of the pillows and blankets away from him so he'll be safe. "I want him close."

"Excellent idea," Sinclair murmurs, stripping down to his underwear and climbing into the bed with us. Then, he leans forward, kissing Rafe softly on the head before laying his own head back on the pillow.

I almost fall asleep when, scared, I open my eyes again, looking around. But all I see is Sinclair's eyes, open, meeting mine calmly. "You're safe, Ella," he whispers. "We all are. Go to sleep."

And so, comforted, I obey.

Cora

My body flinches, awake in an instant, and I sit stark straight in the bed in the strange room – looking around – frantic –

I hear noise at my side and flinch away from it spinning to see –

But to my surprise, it's just...Roger, starting awake in an armchair by the side of my bed –

"Cora," he gasps, his voice still thick with sleep. "You scared me. Are you -"

But I'm panting, a hand pressed to my heart as I stare at him as I remember the events of last night – the strange, half-waking dream where I remembered...

And then I'm scurrying backwards in the bed, eager to press my back against something, looking around the room for him for the priest in the black robes –

My breath comes fast and I'm panting, my heartrate instantly soaring despite being asleep moments ago –

"Cora!" Roger exclaims, instantly at my side, taking my hand. I cling to his fingers, my hand still pressed against my chest as I panic. "It's all right," he says, his voice soothing as he hesitates and then moves closer to me Suddenly he's at my side, the right side of his body pressed to my left. He lets go of my hand for a moment to slide that arm around my shoulders, pulling me tight against him.

"You're all right, Cora," Roger murmurs reassuringly, holding me tight against him.

"You're all right. I've got you.

And then, slowly, I start to believe him. I close my eyes, trusting him, allowing my heartrate to come back down to a normal pace. I take a deep breath and make myself remember that I am in my sister's house, which is heavily guarded. That no one can get in. That... that Roger's here. That I'm safe.

"Roger," I say softly a minute later, when I feel able. "Roger, I remember everything..."

"Tell me, Cora," he murmurs, his lips soft against my hair. "Tell me everything."

Chapter 317 – Difficult Memories

Cora

“Um, should we go get Ella?” I ask, hesitant. Because while I do just want to spill everything right here, right now, while I feel so safe with Roger, I do know that Ella will want to hear this. And quite frankly, I don’t want to tell it twice.

I see him walking towards the door and instantly miss his warmth beside me. Suddenly, I very much don’t want to be alone in this room. “I’ll come with you,” I say in a hurry, scootching off the bed and moving to his side.

“All right,” he says, smiling down at me as he opens the door. Then, we both move through it together, me just a step behind so that Roger can lead the way. I glance at the grandfather clock down the wall – still a little askew, I realize, from one of Ella’s wheelchair adventures – and see that it’s early – probably too early to wake them, when they’ve gotten so little sleep.

“Should we,” I say, hesitating as we arrive at their bedroom door, but Roger just shakes his head at me. “They’ll want to know,” he says, twisting the knob and pushing the door open just a crack so we can peek inside.

We’re met with an instant snarl as Sinclair sits up in bed, hearing the door open and reacting instantly against a potential threat. I gasp, falling back a step, but Roger’s hand is instantly on my back, holding me steady.

“It’s all right, Dominic,” Roger calls out, pushing the door open fully so Sinclair and Ella can see us. I see, then, that the pair of them were already mostly awake – Ella nursing Rafe quietly in bed while Sinclair dozed next to her. The instinctual fear that kindled in me at the sound of Sinclair’s snarl begins to fade as I see the actual sweet reality of the scene before me.

“Cora!” Ella, cries, working to stand up, but I move into the bedroom before she can.

“No,” I say, crossing the room to her bedside. “Stay down – you’re busy, obviously “Are you all right?” she asks, worried, reaching out a hand to take mine.

“Um,” I say, looking between her and Sinclair, blushing a little to see that Sinclair is mostly naked. Roger, at my side again, doesn’t blush at all even though he can see most of Ella’s breast as she mothers all the time – but the casual way that wolves accept the naked body...I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to it.

I’m reminded, quite suddenly, of Hank’s awkwardness when confronted with Ella and Sinclair’s frank comfort with their bodies and their sexuality – he’s a surgeon, after all, not an OBGYN – and suddenly I think –

Oh my god, Hank.

–

I haven't – I haven't contacted him all since I've been here at Ella's house, he's probably going

crazy with worry – honestly, I haven't even thought of him, and suddenly I feel so incredibly

guilty considering that last night we...

Blushing, I feel in my pockets for my phone, but it's not there "Everything... all right?" Roger asks, looking down at me with concern and maybe a little bit of suspicion.

"Fine," I return, giving him a false little smile and folding my hands neatly in front of me. I'll contact Hank later. Now, we've got more important things to do. "Ella," I say, looking at her seriously again. "I...I remember things. Important things. I think you should hear it."

"All right," Ella says, her eyes wide and genuine, curious but not pressuring me. "Whenever you're ready."

Ella

Cora sits down on my bed, exhaling a deep, shaky breath. I look up at Roger curiously for a second, but his eyes are trained on my sister, watching, listening. I adjust my hold on Rafe, who is still happily eating, and lean back against Sinclair, who wraps his arms around me for physical and emotional support.

"I can't believe I forgot it," Cora says, looking down at her hands and shaking her head. "It's like a nightmare you forget about it in the morning when you wake up, but then something reminds you of it, and it all comes crashing back."

"What is it, Cora?" I whisper, wanting to let her go at her own pace but also dying to know.

"The man," she says, looking up and meeting my gaze. "Don't you remember him, Ella?"

"I—I didn't see him, Cora," I say, shaking my head. "I didn't see what you saw in the hypnosis. Maybe if I did – I'd have the same memories – but, no..."

"He's – he's been following us our whole lives," Cora whispers, looking down at her

hands. I can see tears starting in her eyes again and my heart wrenches to see her so upset. "He never approached us – never spoke to us. But I would see him, like a specter from a dream – suddenly, he'd be there. Standing across the school yard, watching us. At the end of the hall in the dark, watching us. And then, once, at the foot of my bed in the orphanage – I saw him, standing there, watching me sleep.

Cora's voice catches now and she presses a hand to her neck, closing her eyes tight against the memory. "And every time I saw him – I'd forget him, until I saw him again – and then I'd remember –"

"Oh, Cora," I coo, leaning forward towards her. "That's so horrible

"And he's the one," she says, raising her eyes and shaking her head at me. "He's the one who made

me switch the sperm samples – I'm so sorry, Ella – it's all my fault it really was me who did it – "

"No, Cora," I say, fierce, taking her hand and squeezing it hard. "You did everything right – that

priest, he did something to you, hypnotized you, made you forget.

"Don't forget, Cora," Sinclair adds, his deep voice sympathetic. "We're not new to this – the priests

who followed Ella her whole life, they wiped memories from her mind as well."

"But they're not the same priests," Cora breathes, looking between Sinclair and me and wiping a tear from her eye. "I can tell – I know it in my bones. There's a tie there, some... similarity. But they're not the same order. This man he – he serves someone else. Not the Goddess"

I look between Roger and Sinclair, who know more about shifter religion than I do. "Are you aware of some...subset? Or a cult of priests? Who wear black robes?"

"No," Roger replies, breathing out a long breath as he runs a hand through his hair. "I tried to do some research last night before I fell asleep, but I came up empty. That doesn't mean it's a dead end, though there are lots of people who have better access to occult archives than I do."

"But don't you see?" Cora asks, looking between the three of us. "It's it's me. I'm the tie. I'm the thing that brings it all together."

I turn my head and stare at my sister, not understanding. “Ella,” she says, leaning forward. “That priest – he let me see him, let us see him, when we were girls. He wiped the memories from our

If he’d wanted to do it invisibly, he could have. Ella, he wanted us to know him, to recognize him.”

She swallows, taking her hand from mine and gripping her own hands together in her lap. “He wanted to be seen.”

“We don’t know that, Cora,” Ella replies, shaking her head. “We don’t know the details – it could

have been a mistake, you seeing him. And – and me, if you say I was there.”

“But don’t you see, Ella?” Cora whispers. “He’s been following us our whole lives. Us, not just you Me, somehow? Somehow...I’ve been part of this plan all along.”

“Well,” I say softly, “you, too, are the daughter of a goddess. If he somehow knew our history, and wanted a child of her line...”

“Then it makes sense,” Cora whispers, finishing my sentence when I cannot, “that he’d want two viable options.”

I stare at my sister, my heart dropping as I realize that this...is so much deeper, and more complicated, than we ever could have known.

Chapter 318 – Investigation

Sinclair

As Cora sits on the bed with her sister, I meet my brother's eyes above her head and nod towards the door. He nods as well, agreeing. He places a hand on Cora's shoulder and gives her a little squeeze before heading to the door.

Ella turns towards me as I stand up, grabbing my phone and heading to the closet, but I speak to her mind-to-mind to let her know that everything's fine as I quickly pull on some casual clothes. Take care of Cora, I say to Ella, trying to send warmth and support along with my words. We're just going to go talk downstairs with the team.

Ella nods to me, with a little smile, and then when I meet Roger at the door we walk out together, closing it behind us.

As soon as the door is shut, we're instantly in motion. "We need more information," Roger says, striding for the stairs. "And we need a drawing of this man, if we can convince Cora to speak to a sketch artist – it could be incredibly helpful –

"That shouldn't be difficult," I agree as the two of us hurry down the stairs to my office, where a team of investigators worked through the night on the case. "I'll have a trained sketch artist come by as soon as possible – I'm sure Cora will comply –" I pull my phone from my pocket and start looking through my contacts.

"Someone should contact Hank," Roger murmurs, striding into the office and moving behind the desk. "To let him know that she won't be in to work anytime soon – we need her here –"

—

I pause, a little, in my search for someone who can contact a reliable and discreet sketch artist to look at Roger and raise an eyebrow at him. "Didn't think you'd be showing such concern for Dr. Hank anytime soon," I murmur.

Roger shoots me a dirty glance. "It's strictly professional," he murmurs, sorting through some papers on the desk and handing them off to the investigators to properly file. "And after last night, he knows something is up –"

"Does he?" I ask, looking at Roger fully now. "Hank was there last night? At Cora's?"

"Roger sighs, placing both hands evenly on the desk and then lifting his head to meet my eyes. Can we not?" he asks, impatient. "Can we not do this, during a crisis regarding your child's safety?"

I nod, but I can't keep the smirk off my face as I do so. Honestly, I could use a little distraction from waiting for someone to bust into my house to steal my child, and teasing Roger about Cora seems like just the thing. But I can tell that he's perturbed, so I leave it alone. For now.

"It seems to me," I say after a moment, crossing my arms and thinking aloud. "That the best clue we have so far is the black robes. Cora said that several times – the man was consistently dressed like one of the Goddess' dedicated priests, but in black robes. That has got to be a clue we can follow up."

"I agree," Roger says, grabbing a laptop and pulling it close to him, "Don't you have someplace where you can start with that?" he asks passively, already sitting down and starting to type.

was a fraud, and that her wolf was dormant?"

"Adolpho," I confirm, nodding and making a mental note to contact him after I find the sketch artist. "We were in touch with him yesterday in case he had come across anything useful in the past few months – but now that we have new information, I'll ask again."

"Good," Roger confirms, still searching.

"What are you looking for?" I ask, working to peer over his shoulder.

"There's an archive," Roger murmurs, still searching. "With some...rare books. On the subject of the history of shifter religion." He shrugs and turns the computer to me so that I can see a very old, very basic website that includes a description of some archaic holdings. "It's about five hours

away – if Adolpho comes up with nothing, then perhaps we can contact the people here. It's a closed-stack collection but," he shrugs, "I'm sure you can pull some strings. Get us in to see what they've got."

"What's the point of this?" I ask, leaning over the computer and scrolling through the options. Roger wants to go to a library? Now?

"It's the most complete collection of its kind," he replies. "Hundreds of years of shifter religious history. If anyone's going to have an answer about the priest in the black robes, I have a feeling it

will be them."

"Good," I say, standing up straight and nodding, looking back to my phone to again

chase down that sketch artist. "You'll go tonight. Take Cora."

"What?!"

"After she is done with the sketch artist," I continue, looking up to meet his eyes seriously. "You'll take her to this library with you."

"Why?" Roger growls and I raise my eyebrows at his defiance of my command. Roger sighs, his teeth gritted, clearly frustrated. I'm curious about this. Why does he suddenly not want to go with Cora? "I mean, what is Cora going to add to the investigation? Why can't she stay here with you, where she's safe?"

"Cora gave us a very vague description," I reply, turning my attention back to the phone. "But that. doesn't mean she doesn't remember more details. It just means she didn't tell us about them in the moment because she didn't think they were important, or because she's upset. If you come across a detail that matches her memory in the archive, it will be important to have her there to confirm it."

Roger sits back in his chair, nodding. I work hard to keep the smirk to my face as I see how disgruntled he is at the assignment.

"Unless," I say casually. "You'd prefer I sent Hank along with her, on the mission...he's clever enough. Probably a good researcher, to get out of med school with such a good ranking –"

"Its fine," Roger snaps, and as I steal a glance at my brother I see that he's glaring at me, knowing precisely what it is that I'm implying. "Cora and I will go tonight. It will be fine."/

"I'll set up the transport," I say casually, pressing a contact on my phone and striding out of the

see Cora and Ella coming down the stairs, the baby in Ella's arms, presumably heading for the kitchen.

"All right?" I ask, and they both nod to me. Someone answers the phone in my hand, but I hang up quickly, knowing I can call back. "Cora," I say, as she comes to the bottom of the stairs. She turns her head up to me and I quickly explain the situation, how we want her to work with a sketch artist and then accompany Roger to the archive, Ella stands by her sister, her eyebrows raised at the second proposal.

"Dominic," she says, looking between her sister and I, worried. "Are you sure it's...wise? To send Cora off? Shouldn't we keep her at home?"

I open my mouth to deny that, but Ella gives me a little nudge down our bond, urging me to let this play out.

“You can’t keep me here, Ella,” Cora says, frowning at her sister and crossing her arms defiantly. “If I wasn’t going to go to this archive, then I would certainly be going to work.”

“What?” Ella breathes, her shock a little too prominent, her eyebrows a little too high. She sends another pulse down our bond to me then, a troublesome, wicked little thing. I work hard to keep the smirk from my face. “No, Cora,” she gasps, “you have to stay here, with me, where you’re safe –

“No way in hell, Ella,” Cora counters, frowning at her sister angrily. “You can’t keep me locked up here

”

“But for your safety!” Ella cries out. Just until we figure out who’s behind this and make sure it’s okay to leave the house!”

“Tell Roger I’ll be ready,” Cora orders me, rolling her eyes and striding into the kitchen away from her sister, her mind made up.

“Cora!” Ella cries after her, her voice all worry, but as the kitchen door swings shut behind Cora Ella turns to me with a grin. “She’d never have agreed to go so easily if we didn’t threaten imprisonment,” she whispers.

“Well done, trouble,” I say, raising my hand up, palm out Ella gives me a quick high-five, grinning towards the kitchen. I laugh and quickly give her a kiss on the head, raising my phone back again and starting to make that call.

I’m interrupted, though, by my mate’s soft hand on my arm. “She’ll be safe?” Ella asks softly when I turn to her. “With Roger?”

“I’ll send guards,” I say with a little shrug. “But Ella...I’m starting to get the feeling that Roger...”

She nods, understanding me. “Would protect her with his life,” she finishes. I give her a sad little smile, knowing that it’s complicated between them, but still somehow knowing...

...that on some level?

It’s not complicated. Not at all. (1)

Chapter 319 – The Archive

That evening, our car rumbles down the road towards the archive, Roger steady at the wheel. Another car with two guards follows behind us, keeping a steady eye out for anything strange. I sigh, already exhausted, even though I got more sleep than Ella or Roger or Sinclair last night. Still it wasn't exactly a peaceful sleep – and then today, with the sketch artist...

"You all right?" Roger asks, glancing over at me. "Yeah," I say, sighing again, my eyes on the road. "How long until we get there?"

"About two more hours," he replies evenly, nodding towards the GPS system running on his phone. "We're lucky that they're staying open late for us."

"We're not lucky," I murmur, leaning down to tug at the bottom of the jeans that Ella loaned to me which are, predictably, too short. "Sinclair is rich. Anyone will stay open that late in exchange for an insane donation."

Roger smirks, glancing at me, but doesn't reply. Because he knows I'm right. I feel my phone buzz then, tucked under my thigh, and I pull it out, unlocking it and looking at the new message on my screen.

Hank: It's okay, I totally understand. I'm glad the baby is okay. Don't worry about the clinic – I can hold it down for as long as you need. Have fun? Is that the right sentiment for a trip to an obscure shifter archive?

I smile, laughing a little inwardly at his joke. No, fun was not precisely the word I'd choose either, not for this trip. My smile falls, though, when another message pops onto the screen.

Hank: I miss you.

I glance away from it, licking my lips awkwardly and tucking the phone back under my leg. I look back to the windshield and realize that Roger is watching me from the corner of his eye.

"Who was that?" he asks, smug. I know, instantly, that he already knows.

"Nobody," I murmur, turning away.

"Was it Ella?" he quips, needling me.

I turn to send a little glare his way. "It wasn't Ella."

"Oh," he says, smirking now. But he lets it drop. It's enough for him, I guess, to let me

know that he knows. I sigh, closing my eyes and letting my head rest back against my seat, my face turned away from Roger, wanting a little nap but knowing I'm not going to get it.

Instead, my mind wanders to Hank, and I think of him seeing patients alone in our little clinic all

night – god, was it only last night? – when I'd pulled him half dressed into my bedroom, gasping for him, and let him peel my clothes from my body before...

Well. Before stuff happened. Good stuff. Great stuff, even. So why can't I text him back and tell him that I miss him too?

I sigh, willing my mind away from it, turning it towards other things. I listen to the steady hum of the car, to the very, very faint sound of Roger breathing next to me. But I don't reach for my phone. Somehow, I just don't want to.

And as I drift off to sleep, I wonder if that makes me just....incredibly cruel. I sigh, kind of hating myself right now, but not knowing what to do about it.

Two hours later, I jump at the soft touch of a hand on my shoulder. I gasp, spinning, to see Roger looking at me curiously.

"Eye for an eye," he says, giving me a warm little smirk. "That's how you woke me up this morning. With a jolt."

"Sorry," I murmur, rubbing my eye sleepily and looking around in the dark. "Are we here?" The car is parked but still running, the windshield wipers slowly moving against a light rain. I look at it curiously, surprised. The forecast didn't say anything about rain tonight.

"Yup," Roger says. "Are you ready to go in? Do you need a minute?"

I stretch in my seat, my eyes closed, and take a mental inventory of myself. Body? Stiff, but all right. Mind? Thoroughly shaken. Heart?

...best left uninvestigated, for the moment.

"Yup," I say, turning a sunny smile Roger's way. He blinks a little bit, perhaps surprised to see it. 'Did you hear anything from Ella and Sinclair?"

Roger shakes his head, turning off the car and unbuckling his seatbelt. "I heard from them," he says, "but nothing of note. All is well at home. If we're lucky, we can do our research here tonight and be home by dawn."

We both climb out of the car and I frown at him over the roof. "But then you won't have slept at all, for twenty-four hours," I say.

Roger gives me a swift wink, stretching himself after long hours at the wheel. "Don't worry about me, baby," he says. "I've got stamina." And then he heads for the entrance to the ornate building in front of us, jogging up the stairs without me.

As I turn to follow, the last thought echoing in my mind is...I bet you fucking do, Roger.

Inside, we're greeted by a friendly, eager librarian. As she smiles widely at us and leads us into a pretty reading room, dimly lit by golden sconces on the wall, I remind myself that she's not actually excited to see us.- she's pumped about the gigantic donation that Sinclair must have made to get us in here overnight.

we've punen some books that we w you use, me mua says, gestumy towards a stack of maybe one hundred and twenty old leather tomes stacked on the tables in front of us. My eyes go wide, taking in the extent of them. "We do know that the Cult of the Goddess adopted the robe that we now understand to be traditional about five hundred years ago. Assuming that the cult that you are searching for is in some way imitating that tradition, we were able to narrow down the selection to the past five hundred years."

"This?" I say, gesturing towards the books with my brows raised. "This is the narrowed selection?"

The librarian nods at me, giving us both an eager smile.

"Thank you," Roger says, smiling back at her warmly.

"I'll be here if you need me," the librarian-says, gesturing towards the desk at the head of the room. "But please, make yourself at home. Just..." she hesitates, looking between us. "Please no...food or drink...around the books."

"We promise," Roger says, giving her the most charming smile I've ever seen from him. "We'll protect the books at all costs. No sticky fingers here." The librarian blushes, then giggles, and scurries away.

"Wow," I say, coming to Roger's side. "You had...quite the effect on her," I whisper, watching her go. "Librarians love me," Roger says, giving a little shrug. "I don't know why. It's always been a thing! "Are you sure you just don't like librarians?" I ask, smirking and raising a single brow in his direction. Roger looks at me consideringly and I raise my hand to the side of my face, pretending to lower a pair of horn-rimmed glasses down the length of my nose, looking at him seductively over the edge of them. "Oh Mr. Sinclair, please, let me tell you all about the

Dewey Decimal system,” I tease, my voice breathy and sensual.

Roger smirks at me, taking a step closer. “You watch yourself with that,” he murmurs, looking down at me with a little pretend heat behind his eyes. At least...I think it’s pretend. “If you’re not careful, I’ll pull you behind the stacks and ravish you. Won’t be able to stop myself.”

—

I laugh, then, suddenly, at the shock of it – at Roger making a joke to me, to begin, and then a funny one at that. The sound is too loud in this quiet space. I slap a hand over my mouth, still giggling, and look over at the little librarian, who looks towards us, a little shocked. Roger laughs as well, his sound much more library–appropriate, contained and measured. “Come on,” he nodding towards the pile. “Let’s get started.”

Smiling, I comply, sitting down at the table and pulling the first book towards me.

says,

Chapter 320 – The Cult

About three hours later I am...over books. As a genre, in their entirety. My hands are dusty, and I'm sick of the smell of musty old pages, and they're just so boring –

Page after page of history regarding shifter worship practices – who genuflected to this god, and how, and where, and for how long, and the minute changes in the practices...

I groan, pushing my twentieth book away from me and looking dourly at the stack of about fifty still left in my pile.

"Come on, Cora," Roger says, sitting comfortably across from me, smirking at me over the edge of a neat little green text. "You're supposed to be the smart one in the family. I thought you'd have more staying power than this."

"Ella's smart," I reply, immediately defensive. He nods, conceding the point. "But you gave me all the dusty books," I sigh, frowning and pulling the next one off the top of the pile and towards me. I cough when it raises a puff of dust into the air on its way.

"I gave you all the ones with more pictures," Roger murmurs, closing his book and reaching for his next as well. "Wanted to make it easy on you."

My mouth drops open in a little outrage at his implication there but then I see the upturned corner of his lip. "Liar," I say, smiling down at my book as I open the cover. The title page reads A Complete History of the Cults of the Dark God, 1862. "You just didn't want to get your hands and clothes dusty touching all these old ones." Passively, I gesture to my clothes – which are indeed covered in a light layer of grey library dust.

"You've got a little on your ass," Roger murmurs indifferently. "Come here, I'll help you brush it off."

I smirk, shaking my head, but ignore him and continue to page through the book. This one, to Roger's point, is indeed heavily illustrated, with many pictures of occult ceremonies and practices that I find fascinating, if not a little disturbing. I'm letting my eyes drift over the description of a summoning ceremony when I turn the page and –

I stop, frozen.

Because it's him, right in front of me. Well, not him – not precisely, the face is not the same – but of course it's not, then he'd be over one hundred years old –

"Roger," I breathe, and his attention is instantly on me. "I think...I think I found something."

Roger is at my side in a moment, faster than I thought he could be, leaning over–the

book next to me. I point at the image, which takes up three quarters of a page and shows a monk with a partially shaved head striding through a forest in a dark robe, tied at the waist with a rope from which charms dangle. In his hand is a stick – or a staff, I don't know – which he carries with reverence.

Black Tubes, nuyer 111

is uns what you saw, GUTA!

“Yes,” I whisper, swallowing hard. “Um – it has details... details I'm not sure I remembered in the moment. I'm sorry about that – but the charms, and the rod and and something about the hair

“It's all right, Cora,” Roger says comfortingly, the tips of his fingers suddenly light on my lower back, not brushing against me by accident but staying there, steady. “No one expects you to

remember every detail all at once.”

I nod, and then we both lean forward, reading,

The Monastic Cult of the God of Darkness is a minor but powerful cult developed in the eighteenth. century. They were formulated in direct opposition to the Cult of the Goddess, which professed at mission of peace between all living things. What is known of their stated mission – passed from brother to brother, never written down – emphasizes hierarchy, war, and discord between peoples. in order to honor their lord, the God of Darkness, who they understand as best worshiped by sowing disharmony as well as blood sacrifice, From the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. the Cult developed significant magical prowess and their abilities to manipulate the elements should not be underestimated. While the most devoted members of the Cult exclusively wear the trademark black robes, many others move through the world in disguise. Devotees tend to flock to high-powered jobs amongst their enemies, particularly in the fields of law, politics, and medicine.

I turn the page, seeking more, but am shocked and disappointed to find that that's the end. “That's it?” I gasp.

“It's enough,” Roger says, his hand flattening against my back. I turn to him, not knowing what to do. “Are you sure, Cora?” he asks me, turning the page back and pointing to the picture. “Are you sure that this is precisely what you saw in your hypnosis and when you were a child?”

“Yes,” I say, nodding steadily. “When I saw it – it was like *déjà vu*. Just an immediate return to those memories. If I had seen that image, even without the hypnosis, it would

have...brought me right back.”

—

see

“Good,” he says, nodding seriously to me. “You did beautifully, Cora,” he says, pulling me against him for a moment in a quick hug and then releasing me. “Look through the rest of the book if anything else rings a bell. I’m going to go call Sinclair, get his team working on finding out anything else they can about this cult.”

I nod, turning back to the book and quickly looking through the pages, my mind whirling. What the hell was this cult? And what on earth can they want with Ella’s little baby? Why did they work so hard for him to be born if they...

If they worship the god who works in opposition his grandmother’s mission...

My eyes light again on the phrase “blood sacrifice” and my heart drops to my stomach, my breathing ratcheting up.

“Miss?” the librarian says at my shoulder and I jump, spinning towards her. “I’m so sorry!” she says, her hands out.

“It’s okay,” I murmur, laughing a little. “Just a lot of work on a little sleep.”

—

Tunesta, Sie Says, K, as to make a copy of ally payes at um sigmcant. I thank her, indicating the page with the image and the description of the Monastic Cult, and she swiftly carries the book away to a scanner so that she can print copies. I lean against the table, anxiously watching the door for Roger’s return.

He comes back a few minutes later and moves swiftly to my side, sliding his phone into his back pocket. As he reaches me, the librarian comes over with about twenty warm copies of the page.

“Thank you,” Roger says, giving her a warm smile, and I feel something growl in me as I look between the two of them. She puts on a shy, demure little expression, twirling a strand of her hair, and asks us if there’s anything else we need, but Roger quickly and politely says no, that we’ll be leaving now. I can’t help but give her a little glare that she doesn’t deserve as we head towards the

door.

Roger, to his credit, doesn't look back as we leave the library and head to the car, pressing the copies of the pages to his chest protectively against the rain that's pouring down over us now. We both dash to the car, eager to get inside, and as we pull our doors open and throw ourselves into our seats the car with the guards, parked next to us, likewise starts up.

"Sinclair wants us home now," Roger murmurs, filling me in. "We'll be safer there, and more productive, I think."

"Okay," I say, a little guilty. Part of me knows I need to return to the clinic, to my work there. But honestly, the only place I want to be..

I think of Ella, and the baby, and solidify my determination. Roger's watching me quietly as I turn to him. "To Ella's," I say, nodding. "Let me know if you need me to drive," I offer. "Like, if you get tired."

"Thanks," he says, smiling at me, but then he looks up through the windshield at the angry sky." But I think we might need shifter reflexes to get through this storm."

"This storm," I murmur, buckling my seatbelt. "Where did it even come from? The weather was supposed to be sunny for days..."

Chapter 321 – The Storm

Cora

The weather, bizarrely, gets worse as we drive. I'm usually not skittish about driving in bad weather, but as the miles pass I feel myself getting more and more anxious. The water pounds against the windshield and thunder booms around us, lightning flashing through the forests through which we drive.

"What the hell is this," Roger growls, leaning forward to look up into the sky. "I can't believe it's lasted this long and it's raining harder, not letting up.."

"Can you even see?" I ask, my hands gripping the leather of my seat anxiously now as I stare out the windshield in front of us. To me it looks like a vast sheet of grey water with the occasional flare of the guard car's brake lights ahead of us.

"I can see," Roger murmurs in reply, a little annoyed, apparently, that I'd even call his skills into question. I roll my eyes at this, but trust him there must be something about his wolf senses that can see into the road ahead of us that my eyes cannot make out. Still, despite my trust, I'm anxious. We could run into another car, or a fallen tree, or a lost animal at any moment – how could we even see it coming?

My phone lights up in the cupholder next to me and I release my grip on my seat to grab it, looking at the new text from Ella. "Roger," I say, anxious, glancing at him. "Ella says it's not even raining at home what –"

But suddenly the car lurches, skidding sideways a little I see the diver's wheel shift in Roger's hands, moving without his control – hear him curse under his breath as the car hydroplanes and drifts at high speed to our left. I give a little shriek, pressing my eyes.

closed, my whole body tense – anticipating at any moment that we'll slam into a tree, or fly off a cliff –

But we just slow, and then come to a stop, and I peek my eyes open.

"It's all right, Cora," Roger murmurs, frustrated but in control of the car again. "We skidded but we're okay. We just hit some high water "Where's the other car?" I gasp, still freaked out, looking steadily out the window.

"They got through it," he tells me, putting the car in park and picking up his phone, glancing at the road ahead of us. "I don't know how, though, it looks completely flooded..."

the road ahead of us. Roger's on his phone now, speaking to the guards in the car,

who have stopped on the other side of the flooded road, separated from us. They speak for a few moments, trying to figure out a plan, but they don't come up with much.

"It's no good, Cora," Roger says, hanging up the phone and turning to me. "They can't come back across the road. We're going to have to backtrack and find a new route."

"Seriously?" I ask, my eyes wide with anxiety. "We can't like... ford the river, or whatever?"

Roger raises an eyebrow and gestures towards the water in front of us, which looks like it's rising by the minute. As I watch, what looks like an entire tree floats by what is quickly becoming a river across the road.

"How did that happen so fast?" I ask, a little breathless. "Between one car length and another?"

"I don't know," Roger replies, his voice tight as he turns in his seat and puts the car in reverse, backing away from the rising water line. I watch him, waiting for him to continue, but he doesn't, his brows knit together.

And then, suddenly, I realize that he already knows what I'm just now figuring out. That this storm...is not natural.

"Roger," I whisper, my words shaking. "What's happening?"

"We're going to get through it, Cora," he promises, his eyes on the road as he turns the car around and heads in the other direction. "Do you trust me?"

And I do. I know it, deep down in my gut, that I trust him to get us out of this. But instead of telling him that, I just nod, sitting back tensely in my seat as we retrace the ground we've already crossed. Even as we drive back down the road, though, the storm does not let up.

Lightening crashes around us and the tree limbs whip wildly above, threatening to come down on us at any moment.

When it starts to hail, big golf-ball sized pieces of ice, I open my mouth to say we need to do get out of this But Roger beats me to it. "It's no good, Cora," he murmurs, glancing at me. "We have to stop."

"Okay," I breathe, somehow at once more anxious and simultaneously relieved. I want to stop I know that for sure, I don't want to ride on this road any longer in this storm – but what's waiting for us when we stop? Something is fighting to keep us here. What happens

"I think I remember..." Roger begins, peering out the window, but his words fade off as he looks. I wait, holding my breath, not wanting to interrupt his concentration, looking out the windshield along with him, unable to tear my eyes away. But as I watch – a red neon glow comes barely into sight in the distance. "Yes," he murmurs. "A motel. Thank god."

I breathe a big sigh of relief as Roger pulls into the parking lot, the wind hitting us so hard now from the side the car rocks as he slides the gears into park. The rain is coming at us sideways now, punishing and incessant. As I stare at it, baffled by the sudden hurricane conditions, Roger surprises me by taking my hand.

"We can stay in the car," he offers, "if that feels safer. But...I think we should get inside, Cora. What do you think? Make a run for the lobby?" He gestures towards it, just a few feet away, but somehow in this insane weather it feels as if getting there means running a gauntlet.

"Roger," I say, anxious, looking into his eyes. "What's going on? What is this?"

"I don't know," he says, concerned, shaking his head at me. "I honestly don't, Cora. But we can't drive in it not now. So our only choice, I think, is to weather the storm. And we can do that here, in the cold car. Or...there," he says, nodding to the motel.

"In a flea-infested bedroom with rusty tap water," I murmur, grimacing a little and looking at the motel's run-down façade.

"Yup," he says, putting a hand out to me. "What do you think? Want to make a run for it with me?"

Suddenly a huge gust comes, shifting the car so that it feels almost as if it lifts up on two wheels instead of staying steadily on four, as a car should.

"Yup!" I say, giving him a big anxious grin. "Let's go!" and I slap my palm against his, tightening my fingers to grip his hand.

Roger gives me a little wink and then grabs his car door's handle. "On the count of three..."

"Wait!" I gasp, sliding my phone into my back pocket and then grabbing for the copies of the pages from the book and shoving them hastily under my shirt, where I hope they'll keep relatively dry.

Roger pauses for a moment, still holding my hand tightly, and then smirks, murmuring "lucky paper." Then he meets my eyes and begins to count. "One?" he asks.

“Two,” I say, meeting his eyes and smiling a little bit, despite myself.

“Three!” he shouts, and we both throw open our doors, leaping out into the elements. I am almost instantly soaked as I sprint for the doors of the motel, Roger at my side for every step.

Chapter 322 – Cheap Roadside Motel

Cora

I'm gasping as we burst through the door of the motel, Roger quickly turning to force it closed behind us as the wind batters us, making his job hard. I pant, looking around, my eyes settling on the startled eyes of the gnarled little man sitting behind the front desk. I work hard to give him a polite smile as Roger grunts, finally forcing the door shut behind. "Nasty weather out there, ain't it," the desk attendant says, giving us a toothless grin.

"Bit of an understatement," Roger murmurs, straightening and looking anxiously over his shoulder as he moves forward to the desk. I follow him, my hand pressed to the papers under my shirt. Some of them the outer ones, I think – are probably ones feel dry against my stomach...

– are probably ruined, but the inner "Well, you'll be good and dry here," the attendant says, giving us a happy little nod. "You lookin' for a room?"

"Sure," Roger says, shrugging and glancing at me. I nod and shrug back. We could wait it out in this lobby, I guess, but as I look around and take in the patchworked chairs and the musty smell...honestly, being able to sit down somewhere a little cleaner sounds good to

"We got room six," the attendant says contemplatively, turning to point at a set of keys on the wall. "That's our best room, but you gotta go out into the storm to get to it." He points to a set of keys labeled "12" next. "Twelve ain't as nice, but it's just in the back of this building," he says. "So you can stay inside, if you don't want to get wet..." he turns back to us then and grimaces a little. "Or, well...wetter."

"Twelve," Roger and I say in unison, our faces serious. The attendant smiles at us and hands over the key. Roger nods and takes his wallet out of his back pocket, sliding some cash out and pushing it across the counter to the man.

Seeing the line of green bills left in Roger's wallet, the attendant's eyes light up. "Will you be needing any room service on top of that, then?" he asks.

"No," Roger replies firmly and I'm grateful for it, thinking about what kind of delicacies a place like this might serve up. My stomach turns over a little at the thought of it. The man nods and tosses the key to Roger, who catches it in the air. Then, he takes my hand and a polite smile and he returns it with a naughty little wink which makes me realize –

Oh my god, I think, as Roger leads me firmly down the hall towards the rooms at the back of the main building. That guy thinks we're a couple... that we're going in here to...

And then I realize that... that I'm actually in a sleazy motel with Roger Sinclair. And that we were going to go into a room, alone. With beds. To wait out this storm. Suddenly my heart begins to pound as I follow Roger down the hall. Roger, perhaps hearing the change in my heartbeat, or smelling some physical change in my body's scent, looks over his shoulder at me with a little smirk. I return it with a glare, but he just tightens his grip on my hand as the numbered rooms pass.

When we arrive at twelve, he deftly puts the key in the lock and twists it, pushing the door open to reveal...

"Oh my god," I murmur, all ideas of scandal wiped from my mind as I go rigid at the sight of the water-marked ceiling, the rug with the mysterious stains, the television that looks like it might actually be the first television ever created. A ceiling fan whirls at the center of the room, wobbling with an ominous threat that it might just give up at any moment and come plummeting to the ground.

There are windows at the far side of the room next to a door that leads to the parking lot outside and a set of woods beyond that. The window is slightly fogged, but it clearly shows that the storm outside still rages.

"Actually, I kind of like it," Roger murmurs, looking around, his eyebrows up. "What?!" I gasp, appalled.

"Sure," he says, looking at me with a little grin. "It's very true crime, very 'will they or won't they get murdered.' I like a motel room with a little bit of an edge. Keeps things exciting."

I somehow manage to roll my eyes and glare at him at once, dropping his hand and sweeping into the room. Roger laughs behind me as he closes the door. I quickly approach the slim bed in the center of the room, leaning over to take a good look at the stained blanket on the top.

"This is...not sanitary," I murmur, grasping the very corner of the blanket between my fingers and then quickly whipping it off the bed and tossing it to the floor, revealing what actually looks like a set of crisp white sheets beneath. "That's better," I say, surprised and standing up straight.

"So eager to get between the sheets, Cora," Roger says as he crosses the room and sits on a wooden chair by the window, pulling off his soaked shoes. "I always took you for a girl

"Don't be gross," I murmur, pulling the papers out from under my shirt and placing them, along with my phone, on the bedside table. Then I turn my back to Roger and sit down on the bed, working at my own shoes then, wanting very much to be dry and warm

Roger just chuckles and says nothing, though I feel his weight on the other side of the mattress as I pull my second shoe off and work at my soaked sock. I turn then, honestly surprised that he came to the bed, and freeze when I see him pulling off his shirt as well.

“Wha “I gasp, my eyes going wide, my forgotten wet sock still dangling from my fingers. I can’t help myself, though, from glancing at the contours of his abs, which I haven’t seen. since that night when he cried in my arms. My mind flashes suddenly to that moment, the intimacy of it – but that’s all wiped away when I realize that Roger right now isn’t wearing any pants –

“Oh my god!” I say, jumping up and turning towards him. “Where are your clothes!?” “Over there, Cora,” he says simply, a little frustrated, gesturing to the heap of his pants on the floor and tossing his shirt on top of them. “They’re soaked. I’m not sitting in wet

clothes all afternoon until this rain stops.” He smirks at me, then I think pleased to see how much he’s unsettled me with his nearly-naked body. Then, to my shock, he leans back. against the headboard, lifting one leg lazily onto the bed, bending it at the knee and looking completely relaxed. “Besides,” he continues, smug. “I don’t see you complaining.

And I hate him, in that moment and myself, a little bit as the first thought that pops into my mind is that he looks like a damn underwear model, laying there like that, his gorgeous tan set off nicely by the crisp white sheets.

“Complaint registered,” I growl, and, frustrated, I whip my wet sock at him, which smacks. wetly against his abs. Roger just laughs, brushing the sock away as I stalk towards the bathroom and slam the door shut behind me.

I take a few deep breaths, then, looking at myself in the mirror. I close my eyes and listen to the storm raging outside separated from me only by a few inches of brick and drywall. My stomach drops when I think about it as I wonder about why the hell it’s here, and who sent it, and why. Because I know and I know Roger does too – that there’s nothing. natural about this storm

But somehow despite that insane, horrible realization all I can think about is the rain-slicked werewolf laying on the bed on the other side of that door. I grit my teeth and press my eyes shut, leaning against the sink and wishing to the death of me that he was just

Just....

Ugh, just a little less hot. Or that his particular brand of swaggering arrogance, mixed with occasional thoughtfulness, didn’t sing to me as enticingly as it apparently

does. "Cora?" Roger calls with a gentle knock at the door, making my eyes fly open. "Are you all right in there?"

"Fine!" I call back, my voice a little too shrill. "Just...splashing some water on my face!" I reply.

"All right," he says, his voice a little worried. But I hear him move away. I turn to face myself in the mirror again. "Come on, Cora," I growl, taking a deep breath as I stare into my own eyes. "You have to control yourself for one afternoon. Just one afternoon. You have a boyfriend, after all. You can do this."

But even as I nod to myself, my face set with determination, as I turn towards the door and put my hand on the knob?

Something inside of me nudges me, laughing, and whispers no, baby. No, you can't. But why would you want to?

Chapter 323 – Sister Stuff

Ella

“I wonder what Cora’s up to,” I sigh as I stand by the window rocking Rafe, who his crying a little and fussing in my arms. I know that he doesn’t need anything – he’s been fed, burped, changed, and everything else a baby could want. He’s just crying to cry, and I give a defeated little sigh, smiling at him and knowing that he just has to take a minute to work it out.

Sinclair, sitting on the bed with papers spread out all around him, glances up at me. You haven’t had any word from her?” he asks.

“No,” I reply, shaking my head. The last thing I heard was from the guards, who said they got separated from Cora and Roger by a flash flood. I’m...worried about her.”

“You know Roger will take care of her,” Sinclair says passively, flicking through the papers, looking for one in particular.

“I know,” I sigh, bobbing Rafe in my arms. “But even Roger can’t protect against the forces of nature. It’s just so strange – they’re only three hours away, and they’re apparently caught in some kind of hurricane? And we’ve got sunny skies?” I turn again towards the window, frowning. Something that feels uncannily like my mother’s gift pulses inside me, making my wolf turn towards it in attention, cocking her head to the side curiously. But neither of us know what to make of it, so I sigh again.

Rafe lets out a little wail then, working one of his little arms free of his blanket and waving an angry fist in the air.

“Oh baby,” I murmur, leaning down to give him a little kiss. “What do you have to worry about? You’re not stuck out in a storm. You’re here safe, with mommy!”

“Maybe he’s picking up on mommy’s anxiety,” Sinclair says, standing up from the bed and coming next to us, reaching for the baby. “Maybe he feels it down the bond

“Don’t blame me for your child’s bad attitude,” I say, joking and handing Rafe over into his father’s arms, whose size remind me again of the tiny delicacy of my baby boy “He gets that from your side. I’m no crybaby”

Sinclair laughs, rocking the baby in his arms, and Rafe quiets almost instantly, his yowl softening to an angry little murmur “Why,” Sinclair asks, “do you always suggest that his undesirable qualities come from me? I come from excellent stock”

SIL...

"Because," I say, standing on tip toe to look down at my baby's perfect little face, raising a hand to tieke his belly a little I'm jealous, a bit, that he quiets so readily in his father's aums, but not jealous enough to take him back if it means he'll cry. Alongside the jealousy, there's also a part of me that loves Rafe's connection with his father, that he like me – finds comfort in the Alpha's arms "My genetic line is that of a perfect Goddess You can't beat that "

"You have a father too, you know," Sinclair reminds me. "Yes," I say, grinning up at him. "A king. I win. Again."

Sinclair laughs, opening his mouth to retort, when we hear a little knock at the door. We both turn to it, Rafe settling down more completely now, and Sinclair's mouth drops at little to see his father there, wheeling forward.

"Am linterrupting?" Henry asks curiously. "Dad," Sinclair says, smiling and moving forward. "No- but how-how did you get up here?"

"Ella's excellent lift system," Henry says, as if it's obvious. He looks to me then. This chair is really state of the art," he says, gesturing to the chair I ordered for my bed rest. Tll really have to consider one of these for myself."

"Ella," Sinclair says, frowning at me. "I thought I told you to arrange to get rid of the chairs. And the lift."

"But Henry needs them!" I say, grinning widely to hide the fact that I completely ignored that command.

Sinclair groans, tilting his head back, realizing he's never going to get his house back to the way it was. I pat him on the arm, knowing that it's the right choice Henry should have free run of the house, and if I'm ever pregnant again.

"It's very practical," Henry says, raising his eyebrows at his son "But I came up with information," he says, pulling a folder from the little pocket by his side, "on the cult that Roger and Cora discovered"

"Oh," I say, moving behind his chair to look over his shoulder, eager to know more. Sinclair likewise steps forward, a protective hand on Rafe as he leans forward "What did you find?"

"Well, unfortunately, that the cult is alive and well It actually makes sense that the book that Cora and Roger found was so old, because the Monastic Cult of the God of Darkness

secrecy. As the book reports, they never write anything down and pass all of their

traditions from brother to brother. This has allowed them to operate in the background for decades, largely unnoticed. It's actually rather a miracle that that book reported anything about them – our best guess is that, in fact, the scholar who wrote it must have been an ex- member of the brotherhood themselves.”

“Wow,” I say, looking between Henry and my mate. “But they’re still...operating? In secrecy?”

“In full force, apparently,” Henry says, looking up at me and tapping the report. Then he looks at his son. “Your investigative team did quite well once they had this lead. The Cult has, by necessity, had to start leaving a bit of a trail on the dark web and other such underground spaces, in order to communicate across distances and acquire rare materials for their ceremonies. But from what your investigators estimate, they’re more powerful than they’ve ever been.”

“And these men,” Sinclair considers, standing and rocking the baby absentmindedly. They’re responsible for switching the sperm that brought Ella and I together. They, for some reason, wanted Rafe to be born.”

“Indeed,” Henry says, raising his eyebrows. “But it is particularly curious that they showed their hand a bit in sending a robed member to do their work. The high-ranking members of the Cult who wear the robe are, apparently, notoriously reclusive. It is perhaps to our luck that the man who tricked Cora – and,” he shifts his gaze to me, “who has been, apparently, following the two of you your whole lives, is a high-ranking member of the cult. If it had been a plain-clothes member, we may never have been able to discover who was behind this.”

“Why is that, though?” I consider, coming to stand at Sinclair’s side and folding my arms over my chest. “Why didn’t they send someone in normal clothes?”

“I don’t know,” Henry says, with a shrug. “Perhaps they needed someone with a particular affinity for magic, or someone with great strength. We know, for instance, that the Goddess’s priests were keeping an eye on you. It is likely that they needed someone very strong to evade their detection.”

I nod, considering that that makes sense, and look up at my mate. His eyes, however, are fixed steadily on his father. “What is it, dad,” Sinclair says, his tone suddenly sharp. “What is it you’re not telling us?”

Surprised, I look back at Henry, curious. There’s nothing on his face that speaks any secrecy to me, and I look back up at Sinclair, confused.

Henry sighs, though. “I should have known that you’d see through me, Dominic,” he murmurs. “You always could read me like a book.”

“Out with it, dad,” Sinclair says, his whole body tense now. I glance at Rafe, registering that he’s fully asleep, and can’t help myself from noting that he’s certainly not letting his father’s clear anxiety affect his own moods, as he does mine. I purse my lips at my baby and then turn my attention to my father-in-law.

“Your intel has spoken to an escaped member of the cult,” Henry says. “The man insists on being anonymous, but he was willing to divulge some of their practices.”

“Well that’s wonderful,” I say, hope blooming in me. “That’s so helpful -”

“It is,” Henry says, looking up at me, his eyes still worried. “We’re grateful for that, of course, but...”

“Dad,” Sinclair growls at Henry’s hesitation, annoyed now at the further delay.

“All right, Dominic,” Henry says, putting his hands up and sighing. “It’s just – he told us that their standard method of operation is to play the long game – to place a member of the cult within the target’s inner circle. To spend months, if not years, becoming a confidant of the target, becoming a best friend or a member of the family. And then, when the Cult decides that the time is right, that person strikes. The victims are...almost always completely blindsided by the betrayal.”

“Oh my god,” I gasp, looking between Henry and Sinclair. “This means...it could be someone we know and love? Someone close to us?”

“Yes,” Henry concludes, nodding slowly. “It is very likely that the Cult has been working for years to bring about the birth of this child. And we still don’t know why they wanted Rafe to be born, and for you to be his particular mother and father, but we do know...”

“That if they’re working that hard,” Sinclair says, picking up his father’s line of thought. “That they’ve certainly placed someone within our inner circle who is seeking to betray us.”

“Oh my god,” I say, my hands flying to my mouth in shock. And then I wrack my mind, wondering who on earth it could be. But no one comes to mind everyone I know and love none of them could be involved in such a nefarious scheme to steal my baby away Right?

Chapter 324 – But Why Would You Want To?

Cora

I drop my hand from the doorknob, suddenly, making a split decision and not letting myself think too hard about what I'm doing and why. Then, I strip my wet shirt and leggings from my body, grabbing a dry towel off of the shelf and wrapping it around myself. My skin is grateful for this, wanting to be free and dry, but my anxiety rises as I tuck the towel into itself above my bra so that it will hold itself together.

I close my eyes as I grasp the door knob again, exhaling a deep breath and then pushing it open, striding back into the room.

A little pulse of satisfaction runs through me as I see Roger do a double-take at my appearance. He has laid himself back on the bed in the same position he took before – shoulders against the headboard, one leg casually bent at the knee and propped on the mattress, the other foot on the floor. He watches me steadily as I swiftly cross the room, coming to the other side of the bed and primly sitting myself down on it, my whole back against the headboard. I pull my legs up, wrapping my arms around my knees and staring steadily at the blank television screen. “Does the tv work?” I ask, my voice shaking a little despite myself.

“I...don't know...” Roger replies, his tone curious. “Do you want me to try it?”

“Mmmhmm!” I say, my hum an octave higher than it would usually be. Slowly, Roger stands up and moves to the TV, treating me to the opportunity to scan the broad muscles of his back, which sweep downward to a trim waist. He even has two little dimples on either side of his spine right above his perfect ass...

I grit my teeth to keep from making any noise, giving him any indication of what seeing him undressed like this makes me want to do to him. Roger reaches out and twists the dial on the TV, but there's no reaction from it. He tries the other two, but the tv stays stubbornly dark. Then, too slowly, Roger turns to me,

I inhale, sharply, when I see the way that he looks at me beneath his lowered brows. His face is serious, and a muscle in his cheek flickers, letting me know that he's clenching his teeth, holding back from...something. But the darkness in his eyes, the intensity there...

“No such luck,” he purrs, dropping his hand from the television and focusing his entire attention on me. It falls on me like a real weight on my chest and I feel my breathing deepen, fighting “Oh,” I say, something in me screaming at the lameness of that response.

Roger doesn't say anything. He just begins to prowl back across the room, heading – my

breath catches to see – not back to his side of the bed, but to mine. He stops about three feet from me, slowly lowering himself to sit on the mattress next to me. He puts a hand out to rest on the sheets, a few inches from my feet, and leans forward towards me.

Roger doesn't touch me at all, but he doesn't need to. The space between us in this moment is thick with electricity, with a palpable intensity that may as well be his wolf's tongue licking up the side of my throat for all it's doing to me right now. I realize, suddenly, that I'm panting as I see his eyes move to my parted lips, as I hear the growl beginning to resonate in his chest.

He reaches out then, slowly, as if to a startled hare, but I don't move. My body is fully pressed against the headrest, every inch of me tensed as if to run, but I don't. move. an. inch.

Roger's hand is moments from my face, reaching for me, every inch of it a plea as much as a craving to just touch me, just once – when suddenly, a spark – a literal spark – flies between us –

from his thumb to my lower lip, just–millimeters away. And I jump suddenly at the unexpected pain of it, my hand flying to my mouth, stunned.

Roger blinks and pulls his hand back, looking at it. "What the," he says, looking at his fingers as if he somehow willed this thing between us to take form to become actual lightning. But as he looks at his hand, my entire reality comes crashing down on me.

—

My mind flashes through memories in an instant – first I see him, Roger, crying in my arms when he thought his brother was dead – and then to me, running out to check and see if he had left on that mission to the expression on his face as he held me safe to those days on the ship, when he hadn't touched me, but had let me know every day with his eyes, with his steady presence, that he was mine, waiting for me, as soon as I wanted to claim him-

—

And then my heart wrenches when I remember, again, the absolute heartache in the weeks after when he didn't call – when I'd stay up at night, staring at the blackened screen of my phone,

—

waiting for him to reply to my texts when I'd cried myself to sleep night after night

realizing that whatever magic had been between us was gone –

And then Hank! I actually groan when I remember Hank, and I put my face in my hands, my shoulders hunching with shame. Hank, who has been so sweet and patient with me. I know that he knows something had been between me and Roger – and he gave me so much space to figure it Hank, with his soft lips, who turned out to be so surprisingly good in bed –

But even when I'd been with him, I'd thought of Roger's mouth on mine at the moonlight baptism

– of everything that passed between us –

And suddenly, my groan becomes a sob ripping from my throat. Barely a moment has passed since Roger reached out to touch me, and despite my face buried in my hands I can feel his heavy attention on me again.

—

“Cora!” he whispers, his voice shocked. “What’s what’s wrong –”

“I can’t do this,” I bawl and suddenly I’m on my feet, past him, headed inexplicably for the door that leads outside to the parking lot –.

“Cora!” I hear behind me, hear Roger stumbling over his own feet in his surprise to see me gone so fast-

But I’m already gone, already out the door, which hangs open behind me, banging against the wall of the motel in the wind. I’m running now I have no idea where running, and crying, my tears lost to the streams of water that fall from the sky. My body pushes itself, responding to something in me needs to be out in the storm. – that matches it, that seeks some clarity within it. And so I run, my body pumping almost in time with the thunder rumbling above me, my lungs gasping like the rain pounding against the forest floor where I’m running. I need this space need the water running down my skin – I need to be somewhere else where things make sense –

Where I make sense, where I’m not totally and devastatingly in love with a guy who abandoned me after making me feel like I had his heart, who wants children I can’t give him – who is somehow now, back who comforts me, and flirts with me, and looks at me like that – but who hasn’t made.

—

me any promises –

Suddenly, something grabs my arm, pulling me almost off my feet as it yanks me backwards. I can't stop the scream that tears from my throat. (1)

Chapter 325 – Finally. Finally.

I cry out as I'm pulled backwards – surprised more than hurt and suddenly I'm pressed against him in the pouring rain. Roger holds me tight, one hand around my upper arm, the other wrapped firmly around me, pressing my body to his. And the feel of him, of his skin hot against my own – my towel is gone, I have no idea where – I cry harder at the feel of him and rest my forehead against his chest, because I know I can't have it – I can't-

"Cora!" Roger shouts, above the wind and the rain. "What – Cora! What the hell are you doing?!"

"I can't!" I sob. "I can't do this, Roger! I can't be with you like this, not if you'll...you'll never love me! I can't have you in half measures!" I look up at him then, into his face, realizing the truth of it in that moment. "I can't do this if you can't take me for who I am! Human! Broken! Complicated, difficult! Confused, and jealous, and mad pretty much all the time! If you can't take me like that," I shout, begging now, "then let me go, Roger! Because I can't –"

I glance back in the direction of the hotel, my sobbing breaths tearing at my lungs, "I can't have half of you. I can't have – just.... lust. It will kill me! It will break my heart, and I'll never survive it!"

With the last words I pound my free hand against his chest, my palm slapping wet against his skin.

Roger stares down at me as I confess everything to him- my whole heart – listening to every word. And then, when I'm done, when the words stop pouring from my mouth and all that's left is my panting breath, he tightens his arms around me, giving me an angry little shake. He clenches his jaw and I can tell that he's mad – but I have no idea why. "God damn it, Cora," Roger growls, glaring down at me. "You're my fucking mate."
5

And then he sweeps me up in his arms, the gesture not at all sweet or romantic – but possessive, and conclusive, incensed. "All I've ever wanted is all of you – my whole life, I've been waiting for it. And I was an idiot" he continues, his voice breaking, "I hesitated, and I'll regret it until the day I

die because there was no denying that all I want – all I'll ever want is this –"

And then he kisses me, his mouth hard on mine, and my body reacts instantly, my back arching and pressing myself harder against him. My arms are around his neck, pulling him closer to me, my mouth open to him as every piece of me – every molecule – gives in.

He's mine. Mine, something in me screams to the universe. And god damn it, if I can have him And the universe responds, lightening cracking above us, the rain pouring around us as Roger presses me fervently too him and ravages my mouth with his kisses me like the world is falling to pieces around us, which it very well might be. The water rushes around his ankles, threatening to sweep us away. But Roger is adamant against it and something fierce within me sings that he and I can weather it, that I've been a fool to run from this. That we can face this storm, and whichever ones comes next.

My hand is on his face when Roger pulls away from me. "Come on," he growls, his skin shivering against the cold rain. Thunder cracks again as he turns back towards the safety of the motel. "I'm getting you inside. Now." Then he shakes his head at me, frustrated, and mutters "you idiot."

I nod fervently, ignoring his insult, tucking my head against his shoulder and breathing hard as I let him carry me back to the motel. Barely above the sound of the storm, I hear him growling more frustrated words with every step, something about insane women who run naked into storms and how he should have known better, because he's met my sister, and madness is frequently genetic... 1

I'm shocked to find myself smiling, laughing a little and wrapping my arms more tightly around his neck. Because Roger is about to find out precisely how crazy I can really be.

The door to our motel room is hanging open, blowing in the wind, but Roger ignores the rain water pouring through it as he strides through the entrance, kicking the door shut behind him, not bothering to lock it as he moves steadily towards the bed. When we get there he throws me.

down against the mattress, a little angry and not bothering to be gentle.

And, god damn it, but I laugh again – laugh, a little recklessly, as I bounce against the tired springs of this worn out motel bed. Laugh, because he's so fucking mad at me, and me at him, and we're both so mad at ourselves and I want to tear him to pieces, and I know he wants to do the same to me –

–

"Shut up," Roger growls, 'swiftly lowering himself to the bed and covering his body with mine. I grin as the corners of his mouth turn up, as he lays his cool wet skin against mine, as he wraps his arms around me, one low behind my waist, the other tight behind my shoulders.

"Make me," I snarl back at him, my eyes narrow and teasing.

And, god damn it, he does.

His mouth is on mine again, hard and fast, and I press my eyes shut, opening my mouth to him and sliding my leg up the outside of his thigh, wrapping it around his hips, pulling him closer. There's nothing delicate or hesitant about us anymore – no more games, no more testing, no

more pulling back. Instead, his hands are eager against my body as his tongue sweeps through my mouth, as I lean my head back to give him access to my throat, where he laps the rain water off my skin like he's been thirsty for weeks.

His hands work quickly now, unsnapping the clasp of my bra and then moving lower to grasp my panties, yanking them down. He pulls away for a moment, trying to make space between us so that he can slide the panties off of my legs but I moan in protest, pulling him back, not wanting him away from me for a second –

“God damn it, Cora,” Roger snarls, sending me a quick glare as the fabric is again trapped between us, stopping him from – “would you just let me do this?”

I laugh then, again, realizing my mistake, and I unloop my leg from its place around his back so that he slip the fabric off of me and toss it somewhere on the ground. An instant later he's back, his face pressed against my stomach as he kisses and licks his way up my body. I tear my bra off and toss it away, clearing the path for Roger to move up my chest and bring his face back to mine.

He groans, a little, as he kisses me and moves a hand to capture one of my breasts, softly squeezing it in his broad palm. “Fuck,” he moans, his body clenching so that he has to pull his mouth from mine at the intensity of it, “fuck, Cora, I've wanted this for so long “Then fucking do it Roger,” I pant, impatient, wanting him now.

Chapter 326 – Away from the World

Cora

I want him right now – immediately – so I impatiently sit up to fumble at the top of his boxer briefs, to push them downwards –

Roger glares at me a little again, at the challenge in my voice, and I glare right back.

“Fine,” he snarls, rolling briskly away from me so that he’s sitting on the bed next to me, pushing his shorts down and kicking them off. I barely have a moment to look at him, my eyes widening at the sight of that thick, hard cock – before he grabs me, hauling me bodily on top of him so that my chest is pressed against his, my legs straddled on either side of his hips, my oh my god, the slick center of me pressed directly against the mass of his cock

“Fine, Cora,” Roger snaps, looking directly into my eyes, his temper riled, just how I like him.” Then let’s fucking do it.”

Without a word, still holding his gaze, I shift my hips upwards and reach one hand between us, feeling the proud length of him against my palm. I pump him once, twice, my mouth falling open as I realize the full size of him, Roger shuddering hard at my touch. And then, slowly, delicately, I position the tip of him directly at my entrance and then lower myself down.

I can’t help the noise that crawls from my throat as I lower myself fully onto Roger’s cock, the moan that turns into a cry as he slowly fills me far beyond the point I thought I could be stretched. Roger groans deeply, his head falling against my shoulder, panting as I take all of him in until my body is pressed flush against his.

“Fuck,” he whispers, and I feel the word as breath against my skin. “Fuck, Cora...”

My body starts to shake a little as I adjust to the feel of him inside of me, my face turned up to the ceiling as my hips start to pulse of their own accord, wanting to feel him moving against my inner walls.

“Fuck,” Roger says again, more definitive this time, and then he curls his back, pressing his hips.

upward, sinking more completely into me, making my whole body rock forward at the sudden intensity of it. And then he’s pulsing, pounding up into me, and it’s all I can do to cling to his shoulders and weather him as he holds my hips steady with his hands, pounding his thick dick, deep into me stroke after stroke.

I feel my climax building quickly and I welcome it, wanting it, angling my body so that

Roger's Until –

I'm gasping, suddenly, everything in me spilling over and clenching hard against Roger as I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my forehead to his shoulder as everything I am comes to pieces, as the tension snaps and pleasure sweeps through my body. Roger holds me through it, wrapping his arms tight around me, and something in me is aware of his hips pulsing three more times, harsh, before he cries out, his whole body going still as he sinks all the way into me, spilling himself into me as I lay my head against the curve of his neck and pant against his shoulder.

We stay like that for a long time, Roger with his arms wrapped around me, pressing me tight against him as I tremble lightly and I catch my breath.

"Cora," he whispers, his words thick, his throat raw. "Do you want it?"

"Huh?" I ask, pulling my head up so that I can look at him, my eyes still a little bleary with intensity, with the afterglow.

"Do you want it," he asks, raising a hand to my cheek, brushing my face with his thumb and looking at me with such – such love in his eyes – I catch my breath at the sight of him. "Do you want my mark? You can have it –"

"Oh," I say, my eyes going wide as I realize what he's asking me – and the significance of it. It's such an incredibly intimate moment – Roger is still pressed inside of me, his arms wrapped around my body, his face just millimeters from mine, so close that our lips brush as he talks."

Roger," I say, suddenly afraid, pulling away a little bit. "Can – can humans even take a wolf's mark?"

He knits his brows together for a moment, frowning, and I can see that he also just doesn't know "Roger," I say, leaning back a little so that I can take his face in my hands, feeling him groan as I shift against his new newly-sensitive cock. "Roger," I say again, waiting for him to focus on me. "I want it. I do," I say, nodding, making sure he understands me and waiting until he nods to let me know he hears me. "But...can we wait? Until we know how my body is going to react?"

He pauses for a moment and then pulls me a little closer so he can rest his forehead against mine. "Yes, Cora," he breathes, and then, laughing, he twists in the bed so quickly that I shriek with surprise and then laughter as my back hits the mattress and he pins me down against it with the weight of his own tanned, muscled form.

–

“But know this, little mate,” he growls, looking me in the eyes and then lowering his head to drag his teeth down the length of my neck to the soft, tender space where my flesh arches down into my shoulder. “I’m going to mark you right...here...” he says, pressing his sharp teeth against it. I gasp a little at the sensation, at the preview of what he’ll do.

“I’m going to do it,” he continues, flicking his tongue lovingly over the spot, “as soon as we know it won’t make you like. Explode or something.”

I burst into laughter at this, rolling with it, and Roger’s body shakes along with mine as he pulls me tight against him, not wanting to let me go. I let him, not wanting to be separated either, until my laughter fades and I find us both lying on our sides, our faces close together, our noses nearly touching.

“I love you, Roger,” I say, quite simply, surprising myself. Because...well, I’ve never said it to someone before. And I always thought it would be hard or scary. –

But somehow, in this moment...it’s just the simple truth, as easy as observing that it’s still raining outside, or that he’s beautiful.

Roger pauses for a long second, I think because he knows how big of a step that is for me. And then he closes the distance between us, kissing me thoroughly, recklessly, his whole heart in every movement of his lips. I’m out of breath when he pulls away and I blink my eyes open to find him already staring at me.

“I’m very much in love with you too, Cora,” Roger sighs, shaking his head a little. “Though we didn’t make it easy for each other, did we?”

“No,” I murmur, moving my body closer to him, if that’s possible. “But,” I say, with a little smirk, “it wouldn’t be very us if we did, would it?”

“No,” he agrees, shaking his head and smirking at me. “But the rest,” he says, nodding urgently.

The rest let’s make that simple. I love you, and I always will, and that’s the only thing that matters. All right?” (1

“All right,” I say, sighing and allowing myself to rest against him. And, deep inside, I hope very much that that will be true.

Chapter 327 – Back to the Real World

Ella

I'm sitting anxiously by Rafe's basinet, watching him sleep, while my mind wanders impatiently elsewhere. It's been twenty-four hours since we heard from Cora and Roger and I feel, just a tiny little bit, that every passing minute is a knife in my heart.

Where is my sister? I wonder to myself, sighing as I look down at my baby and honestly barely seeing him.

It's okay, my wolf says to me, rubbing her body warmly against my poor aching heart, nuzzling me with her snout. Roger will take care of her – I know it. He can't not.

But what if he couldn't, I think anxiously, my mind turning inevitably to that freak storm that they hit – the storm which separated them from their guards, which seemed....just, too precise.

Too convenient. Too perfect to be coincidence. What if the cult trapped them? And hurt them both?

I wail, inwardly, my wolf giving in a little and sitting back on her haunches to raise her nose to the sky and howl a little along with me. She still believes, but she's overwhelmed, a little, by my despair, even though inwardly she keeps the faith.

"Ella!" I hear Sinclair shout from downstairs. I jump a little, turning towards the door, but I freeze, not allowing myself to hope. If it was bad news – he wouldn't be shouting from downstairs –

But something very urgent could be happening so he can't come up –

"Ella!" he calls again. "Come down! There's a car in the drive!"

I gasp, leaning down to quickly scoop Rafe up into my arms. He gives a little half-hearted cry of protest and I know that I should leave him here to sleep more – but damn it, with the cult out there looking for him, there's no way I'm leaving him out of one of his parents' sight for an instant. Not until I know he's safe.

I dash out of the room and pound down the stairs, looking anxiously into my mate's face as he stands at the bottom, a hand raised to take mine. I slip my hand into his as I reach him, my eyes not leaving his. "Is it" I gasp.

–

He doesn't say anything and I realize that he doesn't know he came to get me before he

could tell so, together, we both stride to the front door, which Sinclair throws open.

And I give a little moan of relief, sinking against Sinclair as my knees weaken, just a little, as I door. And behind her – I can see Roger, turning towards her and saying a few words before they both open their doors and climb out.

“Cora!” I cry, tears filling my eyes as I dash towards her.

“Ella!” she laughs, giving me a big smile as I throw myself at her, tossing my arm around her neck. Cora takes too steadying steps backwards at the force of me, but wraps her arms around me nonetheless. “Easy, sis!” she says, still laughing a little. “Don’t crush the baby.”

—

“Screw the baby,” I mutter, angrily

the side as I hugged my sister, but well, in this moment, all I care about is that I have my sister back, safe. “Where were you?” I demand, stepping back and wiping at my eyes, shifting Rafe again so that he’s safely against my chest. “Why didn’t you call?”

– not meaning it at all, of course – I made sure to hold Rafe to “Our phones died,” Cora says, shrugging at me. “We were in the storm for a long time –”

“And you didn’t have a charger?” I ask, exasperated. “We didn’t plan to stay so long “No charging cord in the car?”

“No, there wasn’t one –”

“Couldn’t have stopped,” I cry, “at a gas station to buy one?!”

“Ella,” Cora says, stepping forward and looking into my eyes with her own wide with shock. “I’m

sorry I didn’t know you were so worried. We were fine. – we are fine! We didn’t want to stop

anywhere on the way home, we just wanted to get here quickly. I’m sorry I didn’t think of it.”

—

“Well, you should have,” I say, sniffing a little and wiping my angry tears of relief away from my eyes. “I can’t lose you, Cora. I was worried I did.”

“You didn’t,” she says, putting a warm arm around me. “I’m sorry, Ella,” she says, as Roger and Sinclair come slowly over to us. “You’re right we should have called, or texted, or sent a smoke signal. It’s our fault. We were...” she hesitates here, but Roger finishes for her.

“Distracted,” he says, smirking smugly at me and sinking his hands into his pockets. “What?” I ask, confused, looking between the two of them. “Distracted by what?”

Cora blushes –

Blushes?!

My mouth drops open.

And then Cora, a little chagrined but smiling a little at Roger, explains. “The storm was bad – we stopped...at a little motel. Just to weather it out.” She doesn’t say anything else but the big smile that creeps across her face then says everything I need to know.

“Oh, ew!” I shout, shoving her a little. “I’m sitting here, for hours, worried to death, and you’re out there having motel s3x!?”

“You should try it sometime, Ella,” Roger quips, and when I turn to him I see that he’s smirking at me again. “There’s nothing ‘ew’ about it.”

“Oh my god,” I say, suddenly realizing the implications of this. “Oh my god,” I repeat, taking a step forward to shove Roger for his comment for good measure and then turning to Cora. “Does this mean – are you two –” I’m unable to finish my sentence, my mouth hanging open in hope and awe.

“We’re together,” Roger says smoothly, ignoring my little shove and closing the distance between him and Cora to take her hand.

I stare at them, frozen in shock, for so long that Cora’s smile falters on her face and she looks at me with new worry in my eyes. “Ella,” she starts, “are you –”

“Yes!” I shriek, tossing my head back and shouting the word to the sky. “YES! FINALLY!” I pump a fist into the air and then start to dance in a little happy circle, laughing with my glee. “Codger exists! Codger forever!”

“Roger,” Sinclair sighs, and I see him glare at his brother on one of my happy loops. “You know you need to tell her these things slowly – she’s going to shake the baby “I’m not shaking the baby,” I scold, giving my mate a happy little glare and continuing to

dance, Rafe safe in my arms, awake now and giving me a happy little smile. "See?" I say, "he likes it!"

Then I turn my little dance into a song, dancing a loop around them all, "Baby Rafe is happpppy!"

He is also team Codgerrrr! He knewwww it was gonna happpppen!"

Sinclair laughs at me, putting his hands in his pockets, shaking his head but grinning at me. I give him a wink and wiggle my hips and he sends me a little pulse of happy lust down our bond that lets me know he likes it. A lot.

"Not dating," Roger said, putting an arm around Cora's shoulders. "Mated."

"What," I gasp, laughing a little as I spin towards my sister and, apparently, now, her mate. "How did that happen? Let me see!" I reach out my hand to pull back the collar of her shirt – which looks wrecked, by the way, like it's been through the storm and back.

"Ella," Cora says, pursing her lips at me and swatting my hand away. "There's no mark yet. We don't know if..." she hesitates, looking at him. "We don't know what will happen," he says, "if I try to mark her."

"Oh," I say, my eyebrows going up. Because, obviously, I don't know myself. "Well," I say, turning to look at Sinclair. "Is the intent enough?"

"Yes," he says, smiling at his brother and holding out a hand, which Roger grasps warmly. "Yes, it certainly is. Congratulations, brother." Roger says something serious back to him, but I don't hear it because I'm shrieking with happiness again and hugging my sister close. She laughs and hugs me as well.

"Oh geeze," I say, laughing as I pull away from her. "It has been...a lot of emotions for me in the past ten minutes," I say, putting a hand to my head. "I thought you were dead, and it turns out instead that you're mated!" I smile softly at her now, taking her hand. "I'm so happy for you, Cora," I say sincerely, squeezing her fingers in mine. "I think...it's right."

"It is," she says, nodding and smiling at me. Then she looks at Roger, distracted by Sinclair, and sighs a happy little sigh. "We have a lot to figure out, but..." she shrugs. "We're going to figure it out."

"You will," I say, stepping closer to her and wrapping my arm around her waist. "You really will, Cora. I can feel it."

And inside me, my little wolf gives a little howl of victory and starts to dance around herself.

Chapter 328 – Reconnaissance

Ella

“As happy as this is,” Sinclair says, folding his arms over his chest and looking around at the four of us. “And it is happy,” he says, looking at Cora and Roger to let them know that he’s sincere. They nod their understanding. “We do still have a problem on our hands,” he says, nodding to Rafe in my arms.

“Yes,” I say, looking eagerly up at Cora. “Henry found out some more about the cult – I’ll tell you all about it. It’s...not good,” I say, with a little grimace.

“Oh,” she says, drawing her brows together. “Okay – yes, I want to hear everything.” I nod, tugging at her waist so that she’ll follow me into the house. Sinclair and Roger come close behind.

“Did you find anything else out?” Sinclair asks Roger. “No,” Roger replies, a little apologetic. “Just what we sent you from the library. Was it useful?”

“Incredibly,” Sinclair confirms, thankful. “But yes, we found out more...”

My mate and I take Roger and Cora into the little office and tell them everything, seating Rafe in a little swing that we’ve placed there temporarily since we’ve been spending so much time here.

working on this issue. They’re both as horrified as we were to discover that we likely have someone in our midst who is working for the cult, who either has already betrayed us or will soon. Though both wrack their minds they, like us, can’t come up with a viable candidate for who it is.

“We need more information,” Sinclair growls, thoughtful, as he flips through what paperwork his investigators have produced for the case, as if he might find something else there. I nod, agreeing, but I look at Cora and see her fading a bit.

“You haven’t slept, have you?” I ask, concerned. She smiles at me, apologetic, but shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Ella,” she says. “I want to help but I think...”

“Upstairs,” I say, my voice definitive, swatting her on the rear. “Immediately, sleep.”

“I’ll take her,” Roger says, stepping forward to take Cora by the arm. “Noooo,” I say, putting a hand on his chest and shoving him back. Though I’m not actually strong enough to stop him, Roger complies, laughing and falling back a bit. “I said sleep. Not bed.”

Roger laughs, putting his hands up. “I promise,” he says, “I just want to see my mate

comfortably tucked in. All right?"

"All right," I say, narrowing my eyes and then giving Cora a peck on her cheek. "We'll figure it all out when you wake up, okay?" I say, giving her a little nudge towards the door.

"We will," she agrees, giving me a steady look. "Really, we will." And then she takes Roger's hand and walks out the door and up the stairs with him.

I move to Sinclair's side as we watch them disappear from our sight. "I'm so happy," I say, leaning against his chest and sighing contentedly. He wraps his arms around my shoulders, dipping his head to give me a kiss on the cheek.

"Me too," he says, holding me tight against him. "They're idiots for not doing it sooner."

I don't say anything for a moment, considering all the things that held them back in the first place. "It's not going to always be easy for them," I sigh. "Not like it was for us."

"Ella," Sinclair says, and I can feel him shake his head against the back of my neck. "You almost died like, four times since we've been together. How is that easy?"

"Because," I say, turning in his arms and looking sincerely up at him. "We always had Rafe. And once we figured out that we loved each other, and especially that I was a wolf too, then..." I shrug, "at least with us, it was always smooth sailing."

"I see what you mean," he says, looking calmly down into my eyes. "But their love is a big love, Ella," he says, nodding to me. "Like ours. They're going to work it out."

"I hope so," I sigh, resting my head against his chest and closing my eyes. "That's all I want. For both of them."

The next five days pass with that seeming like a very real possibility. Cora and Roger stay with us, partially because I keep making up reasons why they can't go, and it fills my heart with joy every day to see them growing closer. To see the tiny little touches he places on her back when he leans down to say something in her ear, to see the way she turns her face up to him and laughs at one of his dark, wry little jokes.

But then, on day six, Cora takes me by the shoulders and gives me a little shake, insisting that

she must go back to the clinic.

"Whyyyyy," I whine, tilting my head back on my neck and groaning. "Just stay here with us. We need you!"

”

“You don’t need me,” she says, taking her hands back and folding her arms across her chest. You’re just trying to keep me in a little love bubble with Roger so that I don’t change my mind or something.”

“Well,” I say, raising my eyebrows at her and giving her a too–innocent smile. “Is it working?”

She laughs, shaking her head at me. “I’m not changing my mind, Ella. I’m in love with him.” I squeal a little to hear her say it but she holds a finger up, stopping me. “But I have a life. And a boyfriend who I never broke up with. And a job that requires me to actually help people. And I have to go deal with all of that! Okay?”

“Okay,” I mumble, looking petulantly down at my shoes. “Did you seriously never break up with Hank?” I ask, glancing up at her.

“No,” she says, raising a guilty hand to her forehead and shading her eyes, embarrassed. “I kind of

...ghosted him. But I need to be a big girl and go...do it.”

“Okay,” I say, stepping forward and rubbing her on the arm in what I hope is a comforting way. Be nice to him, all right? I like Doctor Hank.”

“I like him too,” she says, shaking her head. “I feel terrible, Ella. But...I’ve got to go set it right.

Okay?” Roger comes around the corner then from the kitchen, carrying me a little lunch bag that very clearly says “To Cora from Roger” on it in black pen. I smirk when I see it.

“What is this,” Cora sighs, snatching the brown paper bag from Roger’s hand and giving him a little glare.

“Your lunch,” Roger replies, innocent. Cora looks into it and then glares at him again, shoving the bag at his chest and forcing him to take it. “There’s nothing in there except an apple and the sharpie you used to write the message.”

“What!” Roger protests, laughing. “It’s nutritious, and doctors are always losing their pens.”

Cora glares at him and crosses her arms. “You’re just trying to make Hank get the message the moment I walk in the door instead of letting me do this on my own time.”

“Um, yeah,” Roger says, as if it’s obvious. I can’t stop the laugh that spills out of me at that. “But also,” he continues, gesturing towards the bag now in his hands, “an apple! For strength!”

“Roger,” Cora says, laughing as well and stepping close to him, lining her body tight against his. ”

You’re sweet, but also a little bit psycho. Can you please let me go do this?”

“Fine,” he murmurs, smiling as he kisses her hair. “But then I’m not saving this apple for you. Ella will probably devour it, as she does everything else in this house anyway.”

“My apple to begin with,” I mutter, snatching the bag from his hand. Cora rolls her eyes at both of us and gives Roger a kiss before blowing me one as she heads out the door.

“See you, Cora!” I call after her. “Come back as soon as you can!”

“I promise,” she calls over her shoulder, laughing. I shut the door behind her with a happy little sigh, thinking that I’ll see her that night. But five days later, she still hasn’t come back.

Chapter 329 – Missing

Sinclair

“Where is she,” Roger growls, pacing through our living room as Ella sit on the couch feeding Rafe, watching him anxiously. “I’ve been everywhere looking for her – at the clinic, at her apartment –”

“You must have just missed her, Roger,” Ella says, as worried as he us but wanting to calm him down. “She calls me every morning and night to fill me in. It sounds like she’s just super busy at the clinic it got very overwhelmed when she disappeared with us for a few days.”

“He’s keeping her there,” Roger murmurs suspiciously, his anxiety really doing a number on him.

“She broke up with him, and he pretended to accept it, but he’s keeping her trapped in the clinic so she’ll agree to give him another shot –”

“You know she’s not doing that, Roger,” I say, leaning against the fireplace mantle and taking a deep breath. Honestly, I don’t want to be in here handling my brother’s paranoia, but Ella sent me a little shout down the bond letting me know that she needed some help. He’s been worked up for days, of course, but really seems to be going off the deep end now. Not that I wouldn’t be too, honestly, if I was freshly mated to Ella and then she disappeared for five days.

“How do you know,” Roger snaps at me, his eyes flashing with rage.

“Because,” I reply, my wolf responding to the challenge in his voice by raising his hackles. “I know Cora. She wouldn’t do that. You have to trust her.” I stand up straight, my body language communicating to Roger that I can take him, and if he needs someone to pin him to the floor, that I’ll do it. After all, my mate and my infant child are in this room. If he flips out... their safety is my priority. Not his.

“He’s right, Roger,” Ella says, trying to keep her voice even. “Honestly, she sounds fine, she’s just really busy. She told me to... tell you she loves you.”

“But why won’t she pick up my calls?” Roger snaps, spinning on her, “why, when I go to the clinic to see her, is she conveniently not there? Why is she never in her apartment when she says she is!?”

Instinctually, I take a step forward, interposing my body between my mate and my mate and my brother.

“Oh back off, Dominic,” Roger growls, forcing himself to turn away and stalk to the

window, looking for Cora, hoping she'll magically appear in the driveway. "I'm not going to hurt anyone."

"You'd better not," I murmur, leaning back against the mantle.

"I'm going to take Rafe upstairs," Ella sighs, nodding to the baby, who has finished eating. "See if I can get him down for a nap."

I nod to her, watching her carry our little boy out of the room, my heart surging with love for them. When they're gone, I turn my attention back to my brother.

"I need you to come back, Roger," I say, my voice soft. "We need you here."

"How," he growls, digging his fingers into the windowsill and not turning towards me. "How can I concentrate on anything when she hasn't talked to me for days. And I don't even know what I did wrong."

"Well," I say after a long pause, considering. "Did you do anything wrong?"

"What?" Rodger spits, spinning on me.

"It's just a question, Roger," I say, shrugging and meeting his furious eyes. "Did you do something to make her question your mating?"

"NO, Dominic!" he shouts. "I didn't do anything!"

"Well, then there's your answer," I reply with a little shrug. "If you didn't do anything, then it's all with her. And your only choice is to keep reaching out, and wait for her to come to you when she's ready. There's literally nothing you can do now except be patient."

"You're ridiculous," he snarls, turning away from me again, desperate.

"You just don't like the truth," I reply, sighing. "Because my answer wasn't 'go rip the world apart until you find her, and then sling her over your shoulder so you can more easily carry her home.'"

"Well, yeah," Roger replies, arrogant and angry. "Obviously that's what I would do, if I even knew where she was."

I laugh and move over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder that makes him jump a little bit. But I don't move away – I'm bigger than he is, anyway. I can take what he throws at me.

"Trust her, Roger," I say quietly. "She'll thank you for it, in the end, if you approach this

with faith instead of suspicion. And in the meantime, let me distract you.”

“You just want me to work harder on this cult problem,” he sighs, closing his eyes and hanging his head, giving into my advice a little bit.

“Just think of it as a puzzle,” I say, slipping my arm around his shoulder and giving him a steadying little squeeze, “and when you finish it, your reward is that my son doesn’t get kidnapped! Isn’t that a great prize?”

“Fine,” he sighs, shaking his head and covering his eyes with his hand. “But you get maybe three hours of this,” he continues, “before I’m out there looking for her again.”

“Okay,” I reply, nodding and lying through my teeth. Because there’s no way I’m letting him prowl the streets looking for Cora when he’s like this. He’ll completely freak her out, and it sounds like she’s spooked already. So I turn him, my arm still around his shoulders, towards the door and we head to the office to sort through the evidence we’ve sorted through a thousand times.

We spend hours doing this, wearing ourselves out looking for loopholes that we haven’t explored before, calling our interrogative team together to better speculate about the possibilities, when suddenly, the front door to the house slams open.

Roger is instantly on his feet and moving towards the door, only one person clear on his mind. But I’m more wary, more aware of the possibilities and my muscles bunch as I sprint to get in front of him, pushing behind me as we reach the office door together so that I can get into the hall first, just in case it’s a threat –

—

My eyes go dark as I see my reconnaissance team forcing their way in, a black-robed figure trapped in their arms with a sack over his head. I think several things at once, the first being that they would never, ever come through the first door if they didn’t have to. And second, that they barely have a hold on him.

“Roger!” I shout, my voice deep with the Alpha’s command. “The door! NOW!”

He realizes instantly that it’s not Cora, but he responds ably, seeing the importance of the moment. Roger sprints past the struggling reconnaissance team to slam the door shut behind them while I stride forward, pushing one of my men aside and slipping behind the priest’s back, wrapping an arm around his throat and cutting off his air so he can’t breathe.

—

The priest, who cannot see anything at all, struggles hard against me and even though he's a small man – he must have some magic working on his side to be able to resist me so well. Still, he's no match for me, and I get one of his hands twisted up behind his back, yanking it so that he

screeches in pain.

“Enough,” I growl in his ear, yanking his arm again so that he whimpers, his arm almost
qualms with breaking each one of your bones before I tear your limbs apart. Am I understood?”

The priest hesitates for a moment but, luckily for him, realizes that he's been beat. Quickly, he nods. As he does, I nod to the team to let them know I've got him. “Ropes, cuffs,” I command,

tasers.” Most of them scatter to gather the supplies I order to interrogate our prisoner as I move forward, pushing the man towards the office where we've gathered our intel. Honestly, the basement would be more convenient, but until we have him contained...

“Dominic,” Roger says, coming to my side as we enter the office and then pulling up a chair so that I can sink the priest into it when the team comes back, “Let me take charge on this.”

“Can you do it?” I demand, my voice harsh. “Is your head in the right place?”

My brother looks at me steadily and then nods once. “I need this,” he says and I nod as well, consenting. Honestly, it's probably better – I'm too close to this, my emotions might get the better of me –

There's a fair chance I'm going to snap this priest's neck from rage if I'm in charge, so Roger...he really is the right choice, now.

Luckily, before I can act on it, the team floods the room with supplies and together we get the priest into the chair. He struggles again as my team strap him down but I punch him, hard, across the face behind his hood, warning him without words to stop struggling. He cries out in shock and pain, but we've got him now, his arms and legs securely strapped to the chair.

Dominic? Ella's voice asks, quavering, through our bond. I heard something – what's going on? Is everything okay?

Stay upstairs, Ella, I command, sending her a feeling of reassurance as well to let her know that I'm okay, Roger's okay. We've got a priest. We're going to ask him a few

questions. I'll tell you everything – just, stay upstairs. Where it's safe.

Ella sends me a little pulse of compliance, tinged with fear, and I turn my concentration back to the priest just as Roger whips the hood from the priest's head, revealing the face of my enemy.

Chapter 330 – Protecting my Own

Sinclair

I growl down at the man before me, who is younger than I thought he would be, for one with such power. He has thick black hair and a day's worth of stubble on his thin cheeks. The man glares up at me with dark, angry eyes and opens his mouth to speak but before he can, I slap him – hard with an open palm.

–

The man gasps with surprise and pain, his eyes going wide as he stares down at the floor, and I smirk. I doubt this man has been slapped anytime recently, if ever. He has the smug look of someone used to being in charge.

But he's in my house now.

"You'll speak when we tell you to speak," I growl, and then I turn to the head of my reconnaissance team, who is standing against the wall, his hands on his knees, panting a little. Craig isn't a small man to see him so undone by the efforts suggests that this diminutive priest is, indeed, powerful in other ways.

"How did you catch him?" I snap. Craig looks up at me and does his best to straighten up.

"We followed the leads, sir," he replies, looking me in the eyes, "that we gleaned from the conversation with the other priest, who wished to remain anonymous. They were... fruitful. We found this one's lair, for lack of a better word. It was actually in a sewer -in an abandoned maintenance room. He was living there doing..." Craig hesitates and then shrugs. "Forgive me, Sir, for the dramatic language, but 'arcane magics' are the only words coming to my mind now. Lizard skins...and and snail shells, in jars – he had a cauldron –"

"Thank you," I say, interrupting and nodding towards the head of my investigative team. "You will give your details to Alastair, as soon as you can. For now, though I want everyone here for the interrogation." I lean forward towards the priest, who watches me with wary eyes and a clenched jaw.

"An interrogation," I continue, lowering my voice and slowing my words, "will be long, and bloody, if need be."

The priest proves himself a brave man, then, by baring his teeth at me in a little snarl. But I just laugh at him, which makes him falter. And then I step away, secretly grateful for it, because each of my muscles are tensed, ready to rip this man's head off. Roger steps in to take my place.

“Tell us,” Roger commands, his arms crossed as he looks down at the man strapped to the chair,” who you are. And what your people want with my brother’s child.”

The man just grins at Roger, a too-wide expression that shows all of his teeth. “No,” he growls, a little laughter in his voice now. Roger stares at him blandly for a moment and then shifts his eyes to a member of the reconnaissance team standing behind the priest who whips forward a taser and places it swiftly against the priest’s neck.

The bolt flies through the priest’s body, making him shriek and twist in pain, but my man, well trained, pulls it away quickly. The priest goes a little slack in his chair, panting.

“Let’s try again,” Roger says, kicking the leg of the chair to get the priest’s attention. “What do your people want with my nephew.”

My eyes narrow, though, as the priest looks up at Roger again and just huffs a short, humorless laugh. “It doesn’t matter,” the priest says, shaking his head and holding his gaze. “Because,” he pants, a smile growing on his face. “You are already...too late.”

And then he starts to laugh – really, truly laugh, as a crash of glass sounds and a scream erupts upstairs –

And my heart stops as I recognize it, instantly, as Ella.

Ella

I was just sitting here, tense, in my rocking chair by Rafe’s basinet, one hand on the edge of it –

as it always is – shushing him quietly as he falls asleep when –

–

I heard a little tapping sound at the glass of his window –

I looked towards it curiously, expecting a little bird – maybe a squirrel –

But terror flooded me when I saw a black-masked face calmly tapping on my window, grinning at me. I gasped, my body turning to ice as I froze, as he quietly pointed to the basinet and mouthed “I’m coming for him.” (2)

–

And then it seemed to go so fast – the man pulled back his arm, and made a fist, and

crashed it through the window –

I don't know how he did it – it should have broken his hand – Sinclair paid to have those forced his body, head-first, into the room through the hole he made with his fist, the rest of the glass of the window cracking and shattering around him.

–

But the moment he hit the floor, only half an instant later, my instincts came back to me, and I pulled my child's rolling basinet behind me and screamed –

I shove the rocking chair away and back into the corner now, Rafe in his cradle behind me, as the man gets to his feet at the foot of the window. As he stands, my heart jumps when I see that

there are more more men behind him, working their way up to the window and through it

–

moving unnaturally fast –

The man in the lead is on his feet now, grinning at me, starting to prowl towards me –

And all of my wolf instincts kick in, all of them, at once. And suddenly I'm snarling at them, the nails on my fingers elongating to claws, my teeth sharpening in my mouth. It's not a full transformation – not yet – but it's enough, now, to make it clear to the men who gain on me –

That they will not take my child –

Not ever.

Not even over my dead body. I will never let them take him.

"Here, kitty kitty," the man says, menacing, only a foot from me now. "Hand over your little kitten, like a good girl –"

–

I roar and swipe at his face, stepping only one foot forward so that I'm still protecting Rafe with my body but enough that I catch his cheek even though he flinches back. My claws open three long, deep cuts across his face that I can see through the mask, marks that stretch from his ear downward, across his nose and his mouth.

The man flinches back in pain and then, at least eight men behind him now, glares at me

again. "You'll pay for that, bitch," he snarls.

But I just open my mouth and roar at him, at all of them, fury in every line of my body, ready to shred them with my bare hands – every single one –

My message couldn't be clearer.

Come at me.

But the man in the lead just laughs, and then they do.

I'm overwhelmed almost at once, pressing my back to Rafe's basinet and swiping with my claws, tearing at whatever flesh is closest to me, my mouth open in a constant roar. But there's too many of them for me – I'm pulled away from the basinet and feel something cut harshly against my back.

I scream again – in pain this time and turn to see – I gasp the basinet –

–

– one of those men, reaching into "RAFE!" I scream, reaching for him.

–

But something grabs me, hauling me away, as one of the black-masked men lifts my child into his arms and turns to smile at me.

Chapter 331 – Red in Tooth and Claw

Ella

“NO!” I scream, but the word is transferred instantly to a roar as I transition into my wolf, my but I barely bones and body shifting in a flash. It hurts – less than it did the first time, of course – notice it because I shake myself out of my captor’s hands and am halfway across the room at once, leaping for the man who holds Rafe, my jaws gaping. He goes a little pale, taking a step backwards and putting out a hand towards me to stop me –

But that hand, it disappears into my mouth. And I snap my teeth down. The man’s scream pierces my sensitive ears as my teeth meet together around his wrist, as I wrench my head to the side, tossing his torn hand aside, savoring the taste of his blood in my mouth. He screams again as he looks at the bloody stump I’ve left behind, as I prowl another step forward –

But suddenly, I feel a great blow against my shoulder that sends me staggering sideways. And then, almost at the same instant, I hear what sounds like an explosion behind me – I don’t turn to it, my eyes fixed on the man who holds my son in his arms – but I know, through the bond, through some other wolf instinct, that it is Sinclair.

I don’t take my eyes off the man who holds Rafe, instead finding my feet and beginning to prowl slowly forward towards him again. He backs up, step by step, looking over my shoulders at his colleagues as they die. I can see the progress of the battle in his expression, in the fear that comes into his eyes, in the blood that drains from his face as he realizes that he’s not getting out of this.

room. That he’s going to die here, but not until he watches all of his friends die first.

I hear the ripping sounds my mate makes in his gigantic wolf form, the screams of the masked men as he takes them down, his snarls and his roars, the rending sound of flesh. And each blow rings through me like a song as I bare my teeth at the man holding my child, as I stare him down.

It doesn’t take long for Sinclair to finish. I didn’t think it would.

—

It seems only moments later though surely it was minutes – before I feel a warm human hand on my scruff, gentle fingers digging deep into my fur until they reach my skin. I’m not scared. I know who it is. The only other man left alive in this room is my mate, and only he would I let touch me like that.

“It’s all right, Ella,” Sinclair says, a growl still resonating in his voice, the fury still pulsing time to look up at him, at my mate, covered in our enemies’ blood. Something

soars in me at the sight of him like that – my warrior mate with his barbarian soul.

Our

eyes meet for just a moment, and then he sees the determination in me and nods once.

Then, Sinclair turns back to the man holding my crying child. “Give him to me,” he demands, just once. The man does so, immediately, blood dripping from his trembling arm, knowing that his cause is lost – perhaps looking for some clemency if he obliges us now.

Sinclair takes Rafe safely in his gigantic arms and turns away from the man, from me, walking away from us, shushing our child and bobbing him lightly in his arms.

And then, it’s just me, and this man, and my murderous rage. I prowl another step forward. The man raises his hands towards me, palms out. “Please,” he whispers.

But it’s a waste of breath. I coil my limbs and leap for him, my paws hitting him in the chest first and slamming him back into the wall moments before I sink my teeth into his neck, ripping out his throat.

The man falls gurgling to the floor with me on top of him, growling down into his face as the life leaves his eyes.

And then, when it’s done, I turn back to my mate, who stands in the middle of a room covered in bodies and gore, his mouth curved up on one side into a proud smile.

I shift, then, back into my human body, standing up, the man’s blood still covering the bottom half of my face and running down my neck. And then, with perfect control, I cross the room and let my mate wrap me in his arms as I stare down at my child, who cries his little scared heart out.

And I relish every scream that echoes in my ears.

Because if I can hear him, it means that he’s still here, he’s still mine.

And I’ve done my job. I’ve kept him safe.

Sinclair

I turn, a little, taking Ella and Rafe with me as Roger bursts into the room, followed by a few to command them to stay with the priest – to make sure that we kept him, as I delt with whatever was happening up here.

Then, once the priest was secure, they were to come and help.

“Oh my god,” Roger says, his eyes going wide as he looks at the blood all over our bedroom – on all the bedding, all the walls, even the ceiling – and at the bodies scattered almost creatively on every surface. “What the – how did you –”

“They came for Rafe,” Ella explains, and I look down at her, a little surprised at the cool calm with which she replies to my brother. This is the woman who cried when she saw Rafe’s first teddy bear who once told me that she won’t eat chocolate Easter bunnies because it feels too cruel to bite their ears off. But there is a level of ferocity in my little rose–gold mate that I think many – including my brother – forget about her.

I smirk down at her, pleased and proud. She has certainly reminded everyone of that today. “We killed them,” Ella says, her arms wrapped around my waist, giving a cool little shrug.

“You....sure did,” Roger says, still looking around with wide eyes. But then, his surprise fading, Roger looks back at me with a grave expression. “Sinclair...” he hesitates.

–

“What?” I ask, my body tensing. I feel Ella go tense beside me as well as she gives half her attention to Roger, the other half to Rafe, who she takes from my arms, resting her back against me and allowing me to wrap my arms around both of them.

“The priest...” he says, shaking his head.

“He escaped?” I growl, suddenly filled with rage. “No,” Roger says, his eyes going wide again. “Well, I mean – yes – but Sinclair, he disappeared. Just vanished.”

–

“Fuck,” I snarl, whipping my head to the side and staring into space for a moment, trying to decide our next move. Somehow, all of this was tied either the priest allowed himself to be taken here to coincide with the attempt to kidnap on our child to distract us, or the kidnapping attempt was the distraction – a sacrifice so that the priest could go free –

–

Or, something else entirely –

–

But damn it, we just didn't have enough information. And as was made clear today, the cult is beginning to make its moves. And we are simply not ready for them.

Chapter 332 – Bunker

Ella

“We have to go,” Sinclair commands, looking at his brother and then at me, both of our eyes trained on him. “To one of the bunkers. Where we’re better prepared for a siege, if need be.”

I don’t know what he means – not entirely – but I just give my mate a single nod, agreeing to his plan, trusting him. Roger nods as well, and I’m sure he knows more about it than I do. Sinclair shifts his gaze to the team standing wide-eyed behind Roger and nods to them. Understanding Sinclair’s command to prepare to move, they turn away, instantly in action.

Roger, however, stays perfectly still. “Cora,” he says, looking into Sinclair’s eyes, his intention perfectly clear. He won’t go without her.

“We’ll find her,” I answer, my voice assured. “She’s coming, Roger. I won’t have it any other way.”

Roger looks between us for a moment, his mouth tightening, and then nods once before turning to leave the room to make his own preparations.

“Ten minutes!” Sinclair calls after him. “Less, if we can!” I see the back of Roger’s head nod in understanding, though he doesn’t turn to say anything else.

Then, my mate turns his attention to me, loosening his arms around me and the baby and coming around to look down into my face. “You’re a mess, little mate,” he murmurs, smiling a little.”

Though I have to admit that I rather like the sight of you covered in the blood of your enemies, “Thanks,” I say, tossing my hair over my shoulder and pretending a casual air I don’t feel. “I hear it’s the next big thing in fashion. Very chic.”

He laughs a little at my joke and shakes his head at me, but still looks down at me. “Are you all right, darling?” he asks, and something about his voice – the worry in it, the need for me to be okay, loosens the resolve in me. I feel my face fall then, my knees go a little weak –

Because, really, I can be weak now with him here. My baby needed me before – I don’t regret a moment of it – but I have Sinclair at my side now to keep me safe and I’m free to be vulnerable again.

“I’m not okay,” I say honestly, shaking my head, my voice trembling a little. Sinclair looks steadily into my eyes, listening. “But I will be.”

“You will,” he promises, drawing me close and placing a single kiss on my hair: “But we have to move

“Yes,” I say, zipping myself back up a little and squaring my shoulders as I look my mate up and down. “Um – all this blood –”

“There are showers at the bunker,” he says, shaking his head a little bit and looking around the room. “Maybe – baby wipes? To get the worst of it from our faces and hands? But the rest of the time – we need to pack the essentials and get downstairs.”

I laugh a little, heading to Rafe’s changing station with Sinclair in tow, tugging a few baby wipes from the little container and handing them to my mate before grabbing some to wipe my own face. “To think, when I bought these,” I murmur, “this is not the task for which they were intended”

–

Sinclair’s laugh rumbles a little but we both move on quickly, heading together to the closet to pack two small bags with the essentials – a bit of our clothing, and Rafe’s, and then a diaper bag with as many diapers and changing essentials as we can fit. Neither of us put Rafe down for a moment, just passing him between our arms when the other needs both hands. It is an instinct, I think, to keep him close.

As much as we came out of this horrible day largely unscathed, we are both, I know, shaken.

We’re done packing in only a few minutes and head for the bedroom door – which I suddenly realize is shattered off its hinges.

“Do we need anything else?” Sinclair asks, passing through and not even looking at the splintered remains of our entry.

“Probably,” I shrug, following close behind him. “But we can improvise, yes?”

He nods and turns, taking my hand as we hurry down the stairs, not wanting to leave my side for a second.

Roger’s waiting for us at the doorway with a backpack over his shoulder, a group of soldiers next to him carrying boxes of whatever they could quickly gather from the investigation.

“My phone,” I murmur, tugging Sinclair into the living room quickly, where I grab it off the table.

Then, all finished, the group of us move out of the house. Sinclair, the baby, and I move towards one car while Roger moves towards another. There are second cars behind each of these two, which the teams fill. I don't ask about the plan, trusting that Sinclair and Roger already have plans in place for this kind of event.

It has been perhaps...seven minutes, since we executed nine men upstairs in our room? Seven minutes since my entire world exploded. And I'm so grateful that I have a mate who, seven minutes later, is already in action to make us safe again.

Because, I think as I pull the SUV's door shut behind me and turn to buckle Rafe into the little car seat squeezed into the middle seat between me and Sinclair, it hasn't been real, not until now.

Until now, it has just been a strange note and a wild goose chase, trying to find information about who might be coming after our child.

But today? Today it was very real.

The car begins to move as soon as I click Rafe's tiny buckle over his belly, and then I fasten my own seatbelt and reach my hand instinctually for Sinclair's, which is waiting for mine over top of Rafe's carrier. I look forward, not at him, a little lost in my thoughts.

I thank the goddess, honestly, for whoever sent me that note on the morning after Rafe's christening. Because without it....

Tonight may have been a surprise.

And we may have lost him. I press my eyes shut against the horrible thought, loosing a shaky breath. I feel Sinclair's hand tighten on my own, supporting me, and a small smile tugs at my lips.

Because I am safe. And so is my mate, and my baby. And with that in mind, I can now work on the next step, which is making sure everyone else I love is safe too.

"Your dad?" I say to Sinclair, turning to look at him finally...

"Roger's already on it," he says, looking down at his phone. "It's part of the emergency plan — it's been in place for a long time, and adapted since the moment we found out you were pregnant. I get you to the bunker, Roger goes for dad."

"And..." I say, hesitating. "Who gets Cora?" "We send a car for her," Sinclair replies, looking me in the eye. "As soon as you find out where she is."

I nod and then scowl down at my phone as I pull up my contact information, sure that Roger is going absolutely insane right now at his assignment to fetch his father when I'm sure that all he's howling to do is chase Cora down immediately and ensure that she's safe.

God damn it, I think, my little wolf inside me prowling around in frustration, of all days for her to be shady evasive Cora...

I scowl as I press the "call" button and wait for her to pick up. When she doesn't, I call again. And again.

Chapter 333 – Underground

Cora picks up the third call and I narrow my eyes at her even though she can't see me. I can tell she was screening my calls and only picked up because I'd never, ever triple-call her unless something had happened.

"Ella?" I hear her worried voice say, "what's wrong?"

"Where are you, Cora," I demand, letting my tone tell her not to fight me.

"What -"

"Where. Are. You." "I'm I'm at the clinic -" she says. "What's happening?"

"We're sending a car for you at the clinic, now," I say, glancing at Sinclair, who nods to me to let me know he's on it. "Get in it immediately, Cora. Don't speak to anyone else. Don't ask any questions."

"Ella," she hesitates, her voice wavering. "I can't-

"This is not a request, Cora," I growl. "They came for him. They tried to take Rafe. We are sending, a car for you, and you are getting in it."

I hear a sharp intake of breath from her side of the line, and then a moment of hesitation, and then she agrees. "All right," she says, and I can almost see her nodding anxiously. "Okay. I'll do it."

I exhale a deep breath of relief and nod. "Okay. I love you, Cora," I say, my voice wavering a little.

—

"I love you too," she replies, with I don't know what regret? In her voice? But before I can ask more, she hangs up.

"The car is five minutes from her," Sinclair murmurs, squeezing my hand again. "We'll get her. It will be fine."

"Okay," I say, closing my eyes and resting my head back against the leather of my seat. And then no one says another word for the rest of the hour-long ride away from the city and deep, deep into the forest.

I'm a little surprised when the car slows down and Sinclair sits up in his seat, looking around in a satisfied way that lets me know that we've arrived because really, it doesn't look like we're anywhere.

“Good,” he says as the car comes to the end of what is basically a dirt trail honestly, the past five minutes have been a very uncomfortable ride and Rafe let us all know that he was not happy.

“Made it...where?” I ask, looking around at the trees on every side.

“Here,” he says, and nods to the driver, who presses a button on the ceiling of the car, one of the buttons usually reserved for a garage door opener. And then my mouth drops open as, in front of us, the earth just...opens, sliding upwards like the jaws of some great creature and revealing beneath it a metal tunnel filled with orange light.

“Oh my god,” I murmur, my eyes going wide as I stare into it. “That is so creepy.”

“It’s cool,” Sinclair corrects, shooting me a little smirk. “I mean, it’s impressive,” I continue as we drive into the entrance and start to drive down a steep incline into the earth. “But if you’re claustrophobic it is...nonpreferred.”

“Says my little mate,” Sinclair murmurs, turning to the window to hide his smirk, “who ripped someone’s throat out not two hours ago.”

“Yes,” I sigh, shaking my head and putting a hand on Rafe, who stops screeching and looks around in wonder at the sudden change of color, “so imagine what I would have done if he was trying to entomb me.”

Sinclair laughs but otherwise we don’t say anything else as the car drives a long way down the tunnel before the passage opens out into a wide space, like a large underground car park. There are a few more cars already down here, but the light layer of dust on them suggests that they haven’t been moved in a while.

I let out another inhale of breath, feeling suddenly quite safe, if just for the moment. I hadn’t realized that I was waiting for that but, perhaps a little bit of me was expecting another blindside on the ride. It is good, honestly, to be here, underground, where I hope no one can find us.

The driver pulls us into the next free space and Sinclair and I quickly unbuckle our seatbelts and prepare to get out of the car. The other car pulls up next to us and I see Sinclair’s men likewise on the move.

“Is it all underground?” I ask, looking around. “Most of it,” Sinclair replies, “for safety. Though there are some living quarters that peek out into the forest, if we deem it safe to use them.”

I nod, understanding, and I lift Rafe’s carrier with me as I back out of the car and shut the

door Then, I follow my mate and our two guards through the entry that leads to the bunker itself I grimace when I see that the entire structure is very military As we walk through the hallway I peer into some rooms we pass and note that the walls, floor, and ceiling of all of them and the hallway itself are made with shining metal What sparse furniture there is in the rooms is likewise rough and utilitarian I sigh a little, wishing for my comfortable little home But then I remind myself that my bedroom is currently covered in corpses and blood. So. This looks pretty good for now.

Sinclair stops at a door almost at the end of the long hallway and pushes it open. I peer in, seeing a basic little living chamber that, luckily, has a queen-sized bed. I move inside it as Sinclair says a few words to the men who follow us, giving them orders for how to settle in while we wait for Roger, Henry, and Cora. Then, he follows me into the room.

"Is this all right?" he asks, looking around at the very basic accommodations. "It's perfect," I breathe, setting Rafe's carrier down on the bed next to me and smiling at him as I begin to unbuckle the baby. "It will do just fine. Do you have....a plan? For what to do next?"

"The start of one," Sinclair sighs, running a hand over his hair and staring at the door. "You can go," I say, raising my eyebrows at Sinclair and holding the baby straight up against my chest letting him look around the room over my left shoulder. "I know you have work to do I'll be okay."

"I don't want to leave you, Ella," Sinclair growls, turning his eyes back to me so that I can see that they're lit with a fury fueled by anger, and fear, and the knowledge that he came so close to losing us both today.

"It's okay," I whisper, holding that gaze, letting him know I don't fear it. "It's safe – you know it is. Go do your work. And when Cora comes, she'll sit with me. All right?"

He hesitates, so I continue. "You have to do work to keep us safe, Dominic," I point out. "You can do more to help us if you're strategizing with your men than sitting with me in this metal room."

"Fine," Sinclair growls, hating it but nodding. Then, he points to an intercom on the wall. "White button," he says, "speaks everywhere. You need anything, you call. Yes?"

I nod and smile at him, letting him know that I understand. He gives me one last longing look and then leaves, shutting the metal door behind him with a clank.

"Well," I say to Rafe, holding him back so I can look at his cute little face. "It's just me and you now, kiddo" He gurgles and looks at me, giving me a little smile that makes me laugh. I just shake my head at him a little before returning him to his place on my shoulder.

“And they call me trouble,” I murmur, closing my eyes and holding my little boy close
“Nobody’s come to kidnap me in awhile now Trouble Jr is right.”

Chapter 334 – Sister to Sister

Sinclair

I know the moment that Roger arrives at the bunker because he's loud as hell, making sure that we all hear him pounding through the metal hallways. I wince a little, groaning and reminding myself that though metal is secure, it is loud.

Roger's angry footsteps pound down the hallway towards me, towards the conference room at the end of the hall where I'm strategizing with the members of my team who have arrived. Roger knows we'll be right here and he slams the door open as he strides into the room.

"Where is she" he snarls, looking around, as if he imagines that Cora will be sitting at the desk sorting through the paperwork with the investigative team.

"Oh hey, Roger," I say casually, standing back and crossing my arms. "How are you?" I know that I shouldn't piss my brother off any further – I know he's on the edge as it is – but I'm unable to resist the chance to needle him a little bit. He's being a dick right now anyway. He deserves it.

"Cut the shit, Dominic," Roger snaps, his chest heaving a little bit as he stares at me, his fingers curved like talons at his side. "Where is she."

"Ellas in our room with the baby-

"Cora," Roger shouts, his voice ringing through the room and making the rest of us wince. "Where is Cora!?"

"Damn it, Roger," I say, lifting a hand to cover my ear as his words echo through the room. "Can you cool it? She's on her way."

"Where," he growls, advancing towards me across the room, "where precisely is -"

But as he gets within a foot of me I swiftly raise my hand and smack him in the back of the head like I used to do when we were kids, making him stumble a few steps forward and gasp in outrage

"Would you chill out?" I snarl at Roger, starting to get frustrated with him. "She's fine, she's safe, she can't get here any faster just because you're freaking out about it."

Roger spins to glare at me after he finds his feet again and opens his mouth to retort when our father interrupts

"Boys," dad says, his voice low with the warning we've both been familiar with since we

were old enough to be scolded We both react to it instinctually, straightening up and turning towards him like we've just been caught "Enough of that," he continues, rolling into the room and looking at us sternly

"Sorry, dad," we both murmur, and then we look to each other again.

"I'm sorry, Roger," I say brusksly, meaning it but eager to move on. "But she's seriously getting here as fast as we can the plan is working. So, can we just concentrate on other things? You standing by the door panting for her like a golden retriever who's been left home alone all day isn't going to help anything."

Roger glares at me but nods once, agreeing to my logic and – I think – wanting something to distract him.

"Good boys," my father says, rolling up to the head of the table. Then he focuses on me. "Roger updated me," he says. "I'm so sorry to hear what happened to your family today. And so grateful that you came through it unscathed."

I nod to him. "I am as well. But now we need to get to work. Are you ready?"

Both of them nod back to me and, together, we focus on our team, coming up with a plan to better defend against this cult that wants my child and to formulate a counter attack. Because now, after what they did today? This is war.

Ella

—

I look up when my door creaks open, expecting Sinclair and hoping a little that he's brought me some food, but my eyes go wide when I see Cora peeking through..

"Cora!" I gasp, jumping to my feet and almost leaping across the room to her, Rafe still perched, against my chest looking over my shoulder. Cora slides through the small opening in the door and presses it shut behind her as I reach her.

"Oh my god," I say as I wrap my grateful arms around her, "I'm so glad you're safe. Are you all right?"

Then I pull back a little bit to get a good look at her, to assess her condition. Her body looks fine. health-wise, but her face...

"What's wrong?" I ask, suddenly knowing that something is truly, deeply wrong as if I didn't know it already, from her absence the past five days, her unwillingness to return Roger's calls.

“What’s wrong with me,” Cora gasps, bringing her hand to her face as she studies me. “Ella – you’re covered in blood!”

I look down at myself and blink a little “Oh,” I say Honestly, I’d forgotten Then I look back up at her. “Well, none of it’s mine,” I insist and change the subject. “But seriously, Cora, what’s wrong? Don’t say nothing. I can tell ”

“Nothing,” Cora lies, taking my face in her hands “You were the one attacked today – seriously, me frown. But her words and her face are sincere with worry so I nod, taking a minute to reassure her before I get to my own questions.

Quickly, I pull Cora to the bed to sit down with me and fill her in on the events of the afternoon. I watch her eyes go wide and her face go pale as I continue, telling her all about the priest that they captured, and the men who invaded my bedroom, and how they pulled me away from my baby and grabbed him. And then about Sinclair’s intervention, and my own participation in the gory scene.

“And then we decided to come here,” I finish with a little shrug. “Almost instantly. Apparently they already had some kind of crazy apocalypse plan, we just had to put it in motion. You were the only wildcard that we had to improvise about, though, and send a car to find you.”

Cora nods, understanding, and glancing away from me now that the conversation has turned back to her.

“Cora,” I say, taking a moment to lower Rafe back into his little carrier and leaning forward to take her hand. “What has been going on with you?”

She still won’t look at me, though I can see her shoulders start to shake with repressed tears.

“Oh, baby,” I murmur, moving closer to her and wrapping my arms around her. “What’s wrong? How bad can it be?”

“It’s really bad, Ella,” she whispers, her voice shaking with her emotions. I hold her tight and feel a few tears spill out onto my arm. I shush to my sister, making soothing sounds and rocking her a little bit.

“I’m here,” I promise softly, meaning every word of it. “Whatever’s wrong – whatever happened I’m here for you Cora.”

A few minutes pass as Cora cries a little bit, but she lets me hold her. Then, when she’s ready. she pulls away from me. Just a little bit.

"I know you're here for me, Ella," she says, sniffing and wiping at her face. "But he – he'll never forgive me..."

"Who?" I ask, baffled. She can't mean Roger – he'll forgive her anything – what could she have possibly done that her mate wouldn't forgive her for –

But when she raises her eyes to me, I know suddenly that's precisely who she means. "No, Ella," Cora murmurs, shaking her head slowly at me. "Not for this Not This"

"What," I breathe, my stomach turning with anxiety as I stare at my sister, desperate to know Cora releases a shaking breath and then reaches into her back pocket, pulling out a folded piece. of paper that she hands to me. I take it with trembling hands and unfold it, staring at it. But then I "I'm pregnant, Ella," Cora whispers.

My mouth falls open and I stare at my sister, incredulous. She gives me a moment to put the pieces together and then I'm like a gaping fish, opening and closing my mouth, trying to force the words out.

–

"How "I gasp, still staring at her. "But if you – and Roger can't -"

And then slowly she shakes her head. "No, Ella," she says, her lower lip starting to tremble with her grief. I snap my mouth shut and stare at her, realizing that if Roger can't...

"Hank," she sighs, her voice quavering. "Hank is the father of my child."

Chapter 335 – Cora, How Could You?

Ella

My hands fly to my mouth, covering it in an attempt to hide my shock, but it's not enough Cora can see my every emotion in my eyes and my body, which has gone still with shock. And as she takes me in, seeing that my own thoughts are trending towards her worst fears –

That Roger is, indeed, not going to have an easy time with this that it could very well spell the end of their very new relationship, especially as he has not yet given her his mark – She bursts into tears, burying her face in her hands.

“Oh no!” I breathe, dropping my hands from my face and throwing my arms around her again. “I’m so sorry, Cora! I didn’t mean it! It’s not that bad!”

“Yes it is!” she sobs. “He’s the only thing I want – I know that now – and he’s never going to be able to accept this-”

“Sure he is!” I assure her, hoping to hell that I’m right, but then I frown towards the door as if Roger is standing right on the other side of it. And I narrow my eyes, wondering if there’s somehow I can force him to go easy on her maybe even to accept the baby as his own –

But inwardly, my wolf turns around with anxiety. Not his baby, not for Roger, she says to me, pacing back and forth, he can’t feel that way about another man’s baby – his wolf will never accept it –

And I scowl, knowing that my wolf is right somehow. She knows Roger well and has intuited that Roger is the kind of wolf who would feel his paternity on a very visceral level, who would need the blood link in order to feel connected to the child.

I know that it’s different with me that adoption would be a very real possibility for me in the future, especially as I was myself an orphan. I understand it and could welcome a child not of my blood as my own. But Roger...

Passingly, I wonder where Sinclair falls along this line – I know that he treasures his biological connection to Rafe but would he –

Quickly, I dismiss the thought, turning my attention back to my poor sister, knowing that she needs my full attention right now. Slowly, I pull away from her and rub her back as she sobs. Then, as her cries start to lessen, I move my fingers to Cora’s wrists and pull her hands away from her face, making her look at me.

“Cora,” I whisper, shaking my head back and forth. “No matter what happens, you know I

support you. I've got your back. Yes?"

Trembling a little, clearly still devastated, Cora nods. But I hold her gaze, communicating as clearly to her as I can that we are going to find a way through this. To make this right. And I decide, suddenly, that I've got to get her talking – have to get her out of her grief spiral and onto a plan. It would be best if I could get her a bit angry, determined – but, well, we'll see where it goes.

"Cora," I say again, taking her face in my hands. "How did this happen?" And she begins to tell me everything, about how Roger stopped calling her after we came back home – and god, I could kill him for that – and then all about the night she spent with Hank after the baptism, about how good Hank has been to her, and kind, and patient, and how she decided that even though she felt so intensely about Roger

"You thought he was never going to love you," I murmur, and then I drop my head, cursing myself. Because I was the one who kept hammering that idea in her head – that they should be apart if they couldn't agree on children. I'm the one who drove her into Hank's arms, resulting in...this.

"Shit, Cora," I murmur. "This is all my fault."

"No, Ella!" Cora disagrees, putting her arms on my shoulders. "It's not. You were just trying to be there for me. And," she laughs now, low and ironic. "And seriously, if it's anyone's fault, it's mine. What was I thinking, not using contraception? I'm a fertility doctor, for heaven's sake. If anyone knows the risks, it's me."

I whip my head up at that. "Seriously, Cora," I say, my eyes wide. "What were you thinking?" And then we both just stare at each other, and, quite suddenly, burst out laughing. And it carries on, and on- and even though nothing about this is funny, not really, we can't seem to hold ourselves together. As soon as one of us starts to stop, we catch each other's eyes again and the peels of laughter start all over desperate, humorless laughter, as if we're clutching to the edges of our sanity.

"Oh my god," Cora says, bent over, clutching her cramping stomach and wiping a tear from her eye. "It's so not funny, Ella..." she murmurs.

"I know," I reply, my giggles still peeling from me. "I feel so horrible. It's just so ridiculous, Cora – just the incredibly bad luck of it -"

And then, slowly, we come back to each other. And honestly, like rain, the laughter brought a little peace. I can see it in her face now, that she believes me, that she knows that whatever happens she still has her sister on her side. And even at the worst, we'll still find something to laugh at.

“God, Cora,” I murmur, shaking my head at her and taking her hand and giving her a sad little smile. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, Ella,” she sighs, holding my gaze steadily, her eyes a little lost. “Are you going to...keep it?” I ask, and I watch as her hand drifts to her stomach.

“I don’t know,” she repeats, shrugging and looking away from me now. “Honestly, I never thought much about being a mom. It was never on the table. And since Roger and I got together...it was even more of a non- issue.”

“Okay,” I say, not wanting to push her on it. “Have you told Hank?”

Slowly, looking at the floor, she shakes her head. “I can’t be with him, Ella. We we broke up. I did it, the day I went back to the clinic, after spending all that time at your house with Roger.” She looks up at me then, her expression grieved anew. “It was horrible. You know how stoic Hank is he was so upset, but he was trying to hold it together.... I mean, I don’t know how I go back to him now and tell him I’m having his kid.”

“I get it,” I say, squeezing her hand. We’re silent for a moment before I breach the topic I know that she really doesn’t want to address. But I know that it’s time. “Cora,” I start, hesitating, “Roger has been... completely flipping out since you’ve been gone.”

“I know,” she groans, putting her face in her hand. “He has been blowing up my phone. But once I found out I was pregnant – honestly, I just took a test on a whim because I didn’t get my period after one day – I just...I couldn’t I squeeze her hand.

Honestly, it wouldn’t have been my choice – I would have run to Sinclair, needing his comfort, wanting his help, even if I’d done something that I knew was going to feel like a knife in his chest. After all, Cora didn’t mean for this to happen – and it happened before she and Roger were together. So it’s not a betrayal...

But still. I try to imagine Sinclair’s face if I had to tell him I was pregnant with someone else’s child, even if it was a mistake...

And the pain I feel, just imagining it...I reach out and put a hand on Cora’s shoulder, understanding anew. Rafe lets out a little chirping cry as I stare at my sister – he’s not unhappy, just suddenly aware –

And the door to the room opens. Cora and I both spin to look at it, our eyes wide –

Shit, shit I think as I look to see –

But I let out my breath when I see that it’s just Sinclair, carrying a tray of food for me. He smiles when he sees Cora, crossing the room to greet her, but after he takes a few steps

he stops as if he hits a wall.

Sinclair's face falls, his eyes going wide, as he focuses on her, staring at her, his gaze flicking fast over her form. And suddenly, I realize that he knows that he can smell her –

“Oh my god,” he says, his voice shaking. “The door!” I shout, knowing that if Sinclair is here, Roger isn't far behind –

Sinclair goes pale, spinning to slam the door shut – and he almost gets there, almost gets it closed – But Roger shoves his shoulder against it before the door can click.

“Hey!” he shouts, cheerful, not yet realizing that Cora is here, clearly thinking that Sinclair is just playing some kind of game and pretending to keep him out.

Tense, staring at the door, Cora grabs my hand. Sinclair works frantically to shut the door, but Roger realizes something is wrong and growls, slamming his entire weight against the door so that Sinclair stumbles back into the room.

Roger storms in, worried, intuiting that we're keeping something from him, but his face brightens immediately when he sees Cora on the bed next to me.

“Cora!” he cries, relief and delight chasing each other across his expression as he takes three steps into the room.

And then her scent hits him. And he falls immediately into a crouch, his face confused and worried and defensive – “Roger!” Sinclair snaps. “Calm down! Stop!”

But Roger ignores him, slowly prowling towards Cora, who jumps to her feet next to me, going pale. I stand too, placing myself between them, but Roger continues to slink towards us.

“How...” he growls, his eyes sweeping over her and I realize suddenly that – he's not... he's not mad...

He's terrified.

“How?” he asks again. “How Cora? How did you get my pup?”

Chapter 336 – Explode

Ella

I gasp, my hands again flying to my mouth –

His pup his –“Oh my god,” I murmur, my eyes flashing to Cora’s shocked face But before I can do anything, say anything else, Roger leaps forward, grabbing Cora hard by the arms. She screams, terrified, and I can see the very real shock and fear on her face as Roger shakes her once, hard.

“How, Cora!” he yells, his eyes wide- so wide I can see the whites all around them – I gasp, realizing that Roger is completely flipping out – realizing that he’s he’s turning.

Sinclair sees it the moment I do and bellows, crossing the room in two steps and grabbing Roger around the waist, tackling him to the floor as Roger’s body changes swiftly, flashing into his wolf form in the blink of an eye. I move to reach for Cora, wanting her by my side, but Sinclair and Roger are between us.

I move, fast, grabbing Rafe’s carrier and dashing along the wall to the back of the room, watching Cora stumble backwards towards it as well. Rafe starts to wail with the shock and the noise of it all, but we reach the back wall at the same time as Cora.

Snarls rip through the air as I take Cora’s hand. As I snap my attention back to our mates I see that they’re both in their wolf forms, snapping at each other, wrestling on the ground, each seeking dominance –

“Oh my god,” Cora murmurs, her hand shaking as she raises it to her mouth, unable to take her eyes away from her mate fighting mine.

“It’s okay,” I assure her, reaching out and taking her hand, hoping that I’m right, “He was just – he was just really freaked out Cora –”

She turns her eyes to me, scared, but I squeeze her hand, willing her to believe that it’s all right. I open my mouth to say something, but my words are drowned out by a mighty roar and we both spin our heads back to the wolves to see Sinclair standing over Roger, pinning him down beneath his paws, Sinclair’s mouth open and with all his razor teeth on display.

Next to me, I feel Cora tremble and realize that while she’s lived amongst wolves for a while now – and while I’ve had time to get used to this kind of ferocity as part of my life and my own identity

That, well, this is perhaps the first time she’s experiencing it for herself. And that, perhaps, it’s not the best moment for her to have this experience.

Even though he's crying, and even though it goes against everything in my mother's heart to put Rafe's carrier down and ignore him, I do just that. And then I wrap my arms around my sister and let her tuck her face against my shoulder, crying her heart out in fear, and grief, and shock, and surprise

And whatever else it is she's feeling.

As she does, I look over her head at Sinclair, who I see is stepping away from Roger now, some of the intensity going out of them. All right? I ask him, mind-to-mind.

Yes, he replies instantly, looking at me with his fierce wolf's eyes. He flipped out – it was a purely bodily reaction to the shock, stress, and surprise. Fight or flight, and his body unfortunately-picked fight. I needed to pin him down so he could take a second and realize that he's being an ass.

I nod, understanding, and I feel my mate smirk as he transforms back into his human body. And in a flash of light, he's there, that smirk right on his face where I knew it would be. Sinclair tucks his hands into his pockets and nudges Roger's wolf with his toe. "He's embarrassed, now," he says, his voice light. "He knows he's behaved badly, and he doesn't want to face you all."

I feel Cora lift her head from my shoulder, surprised as she watches Roger's wolf get to his feet hanging his head a little but looking directly at her. Slowly, she uncurls herself from me and stands on her own, looking into his face.

"Come on, Roger," I urge softly, kneeling down to attend to my own baby boy, lifting him up into

my arms and bobbing him, hoping he settles. "It will be all right."

And then there's a flash of light, and he's standing there in front of us, devastated.

"Cora," Roger breathes, shaking his head, his face full of grief. "Cora, I'm so sorry "It's okay," she murmurs, her hands still shaking.

He crosses to her in a few steps and takes her face in his hands, staring down into her eyes. You're you're all right? God, Cora, if I hurt you I'd kill myself "

"I'm okay," she stumbles out, laughing a little and looking up at him, and as I stand with Rafe in my arms I can feel my heart in my throat to see the love she has for him written plain on her face. "I'm a a little shaken, Roger – you scared me –"

"I'm sorry," he whispers again, shaking his head, earnest apology written in every line of

him. " I'm so sorry, Cora:"

And then he takes a step back, his hands sliding to Cora's shoulders as he looks down at her stomach, marveling.

"Is it..." she says, her hands going to her stomach as she likewise looks down at herself. "Is it really..."

"Yes," he breathes and they look up at each other again. "It is I can smell it, can sense the bloodline – Cora –"

And then laughter bubbles out of her shocked, relieved, delighted laughter And Roger stares at her face for a second, and then he's laughing too. And he grabs her again different this time, with no fear, no aggression – just sweeping her up in his arms and spinning her around in a circle as they marvel at themselves, at this impossible thing they made –

I tear my eyes away from them, just for a second, a huge smile on my face as I meet Sinclair's. eyes beyond them. I see the same expression on his face as he and I stare at each other.

–

Because whatever this is however it happened It's a miracle. And it's good. take a step towards Cora as Roger places her back on her feet, but Sinclair nudges me in my mind. Come on, trouble, he urges. Give them a minute.

But – I gasp, looking at him with pleading in my eyes. Sinclair just cocks his head at me and narrows his eyes. I scowl, realizing that he's right. I glance again at Cora and Roger and find them totally lost in each other, their faces hardly an inch apart as they whisper whatever it is they're whispering – how much they love each other, their future plans, speculations about what the hell is going on.

And I sigh, desperately wanting to be in on those conversations, but I pout and move to my mate's side instead, my still-crying baby in my arms.

"Give him to me," he says, and I do, settling Rafe into the baby-whisperer's arms and leaning my head on Sinclair's shoulder as we walk out of the room and shut the door behind us.

"Unfair," I sigh, looking over my shoulder at the closed door as we walk down the hall towards the conference room. "Cora got to be there when all the drama went down when I got pregnant. But now she's the human pregnant with a wolf baby and it is deeply unfair that I have to give her privacy."

"You're right," Sinclair says, not meaning it, but humoring me. I can tell by the smirk I still see on his face as I look up at him. "But hey," he says, grinning down at me. "At least, in recompense, they're giving Rafe a little cousin to play with."

And I gasp as I look down at Rafe in my mate's arms, a little chagrined to see how easily he quieted there but filled with excitement none the less.

"Hear that, baby?" I whisper to him. "A new cousin to play with!"

But Rafe doesn't really seem to care, frowning and turning his face away from me and towards his dad, clearly wanting to sleep.

"He doesn't get it," I say, smiling up at my mate. "He will," Sinclair says. "A new baby Sinclair. This one as much a miracle as the last."

"But no where near as cute," I whisper, grinning up at my mate. Sinclair doesn't commit to a side, but he gives me a wink, and I know that he, too, knows it's true. And so I kiss him, and the two of us settle in to wait until Cora and Roger are ready to come out and tell us everything.

Chapter 337 – Fatherhood

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Fatherhood

Cora

I don't really notice when Ella leaves. I'm too busy crying.

I think I scare Roger again when I start, because it's just a few tears at first, but then suddenly I'm blubbering against his shoulder because it feels like every single emotion I've ever had – every single one – is racing through me at once.

–

"Cora," Roger whispers, concerned, pulling me to him. But when I don't stop he just holds me tight, shushing me and rubbing a hand up and down my back. Then, when I continue, he slowly walks backwards with me in his arms until his legs hit the bed, and then he sits down, pulling me into his lap, and lays back, taking me with him.

I

start to calm down then

,

curled against Roger's body, breathing in the warm scent of him as he makes soft comforting noises and kisses my head and whispers to me that it's all right and that I'm lovely.

I'm embarrassed when I get myself together – seriously, the guy finds out that he's going to be a dad and all I do is cry about it for five solid minutes – but when I look up at him he gives me a gentle smile, like he doesn't mind at all.

"I'm so sorry, Roger," I murmur.

"What?" he asks. "Cora, I'm the one who grabbed you and flipped out and spontaneously transformed into my wolf in a panic –"

“Yes,” I concede, nodding, but still feeling guilty. “But Roger, I didn’t call you for five days

“That’s all right Cora,” Roger replies, dismissing it way too easily as he strokes my hair.

And I shake my head at him as I realize that he’s just completely overwhelmed by his excitement about the baby right now – that he’s willing to forgive me anything in this moment because he’s not thinking straight. But then his hand pauses on my hair and I see him start to figure it out. “Wait,” he says, hesitating and looking at me more seriously. “Cora, why didn’t you call me for five days?”

–

“Because,” I answer, holding his eyes but blushing regardless, not wanting – at all – to talk about my other sex partners with my mate. Especially now, when he’s probably newly volatile and protective with his new dad instincts to kill anyone who threatens to take me away from him.

“Because, Roger...until you came into this room right now, and sensed your connection?

I

thought the baby was Hank’s.”

“Oh,” Roger says, his eyes going wide as he stares at me. Then, slowly, he rests his head back

“I mean,

”

I say, hesitating. “I didn’t want it to be. It was just... the logical thing to think at the time. I can’t smell the baby’s bloodline, and had no reason to assume that I – unlike literally any other human woman

–

could, somehow, carry a wolf baby...”

“No, I get it,” Roger replies evenly, still staring the ceiling and I think sorting through his own feelings.

—
“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I should have told you – I was a coward. I just... I didn’t know what to say

.
I
didn’t want to face it, especially if it meant...” I bite my lip, not wanting to face it.

“Did you think I would leave you?” Roger asks, his voice quiet, looking down at me now.

“I don’t know,” I answer, honest. “Would you have

?

”

“No,” he replies instantly, but then he hesitates. “

I

mean, Cora, it would have been...incredibly difficult for me. And I love

you

– I don’t think I’d ever find another mate – but,” he sighs and puts a hand over his face as he shakes his head, admitting the truth to himself. “If you were carrying

—

another man’s baby...it would have put an incredible strain on our relationship.”

I sit quietly, looking at him for a few moments. “But,” I say after a long pause. “It’s... not someone else’s child. It’s yours.” The words are shaky as they fall from my mouth, because I still can’t believe it.

“Yes, that’s right,” Roger replies, moving his hand down his face and looking at me, a little smile on his mouth. “So...do we even need to...think about it?”

“Do you want to?” I ask, curious.

“Not...a lot...” he confesses, grimacing.

"I mean," I say, cocking my head to the side. "Do you forgive me? For...sleeping with him

?

"

"Cora," Roger murmurs, sitting up and obliging me to sit up as well, considering that I'm laying on his chest. Then he takes my face in his hands again. "There's nothing to forgive. I don't care if you've had a romantic past – we weren't even together when you slept with him. I didn't like it, but I'd never hold it against you."

—

I blush, realizing that I've perhaps been feeling...well, feeling a little slutty about the fact that I slept with Hank two days before I slept with Roger. But as I look up into Roger's eyes I realize that that's a completely human emotion – that wolves, unlike humans, are not precious about chastity or prude about sex. They're incredibly fierce about their mates, of course, but...we weren't mated when it happened.

"All I care about," Roger says, shaking his head slowly from side to side as he stares at me

,

"is our future. All right? Me, you, and

this

... weird little baby..." he murmurs, looking down at my stomach.

"Is it weird?" I ask, looking down at my stomach again, suddenly scared that Roger can smell something strange about the baby

—

"Well, yeah, it's weird," he says, but when he looks up at my face he sees that he's scared me a little bit. "No, Cora –" Roger says quickly, laughing and pressing a quick kiss to my mouth. "Not like that – just... we didn't think it could exist. Right?"

“Okay,” I say on a relieved exhale of breath. “Okay.” And then I lay my head against Roger’s chest again as he lays back down on the bed, wrapping his arms around me, and I close my eyes and let myself feel...

Safe.

For the first time in days, I feel safe.

As I exhale again, though, I hear Roger take a deep breath and hold it. I look up at him, curious. “What is it?” I ask.

“Cora,” Roger says, staring guiltily up at the ceiling. “You’ve taken most of the blame for this whole Hank situation,” he sighs, shaking his head again. “But honestly...it’s all my fault. I haven’t been fair to you.”

“What?” I ask, frowning at him. And then Roger moves to sit up again, folding his legs together on the bed and taking my hands. Unnerved a bit, but curious, I do the same, sitting across from him so that I can see his face.

“Cora,” Roger says, holding my gaze like a penitent man even though guilt is clearly written all over him,

“

you didn’t call me for five days this week. But I...” he sighs, looking down at the bed and shaking his head again. “I didn’t call you for weeks when we got back to the capital, after

our

time

in the desert.”

—

“But,” I whisper, frowning at him. “It’s different,” I point out. “We we weren’t mated.”

“I know,

”

he says, meeting my eyes again and nodding. “But...I never told

you why I stopped calling you.”

And I go a little pale as he says this. Honestly, I just thought that he had lost interest in me – or that he decided that wanting to be a father was more important to him than his attraction to a

human woman.

But now he tells me that there’s a reason? A

real

,

concrete reason, why he didn’t call?

And I hold my breath, not sure if I actually want to know.

Chapter 338 – Choices

338

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Choices

Cora

“It’s all right,” Roger says, his eyes going wide as he takes in my pale face, my scared expression and realizes that he’s freaked me out for the third or fourth time today.

“It’s not – it’s not bad, I was just kind of a dick – it was a misunderstanding –”

“What?” I ask, more confused now than ever.

–

“Listen,” he says, leaning in towards me. “Just let me tell you, all right? It was going to tell

you

at some point, definitely not like this but...” he sighs, looking into my face and then down at my stomach, and then back up into my eyes. “I think that... if we’re going to start on this new part

–

–

of our lives – this parent thing – well,” he says, giving me a charming little half-smile and a

shrug. “We should be on the same page, right?”

I nod, agreeing, but looking at him a little askance. “Did you not think that we should...go into our mating? On the same page?”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “It’s a little different, Cora – because it didn’t matter – I didn’t think we could have kids

–

I frown at him – not mad or angry, but confused...

“Listen, let me just tell it,” he says, leaning forward and looking at me with pleading eyes.

“Okay,” I say, quite simply, taking his hands and leaning even closer to press a kiss to his mouth letting him know that I’m listening with an open heart.

“Okay,” Roger says again, taking a deep breath before he begins. “Do you remember... when you and Ella went into the desert with her mother, Regina?”

“Reina,” I correct softly, and he laughs.

“Right,” he says, shaking his head. “Those names are so easy to mix up. Anyway – you three were out on your girls trip, and my choice was either to hang out with those priests in the temple, or go back on to the ship all alone.

”

I smirk at him, knowing precisely which one he chose. He sees my smile and laughs a little.

“Yeah,” he says, grinning at me. “I chose solitude. Or

at

least...I thought I did.”

“Was there someone on the ship?” I ask

,

curious.

“

Not precisely

,

”

he replies. “I was standing at the bow looking out at the desert – honestly, a little pissed off at being left behind. Sinclair sent me to protect Ella, and there’s frankly nowhere I wanted to be except at

your

side

—

”

I

smile when I hear this, but I don't interrupt.

“But then, as I was looking at the sky, staring at the moon, it started to grow... brighter and brighter. And at first I thought that I was just crazy or drunk I mean, the captain gave me a little of his whiskey when he saw how upset I was

I squeeze his hands a little, begging him to focus, and he looks at me again and nods.

“And suddenly,” he says, his voice faltering a little, looking down at our joined hands, “she was there.”

“Who?” I ask, a little breathless, but some part of me knowing already.

Roger looks up at me now, his eyes wide and still a little startled by the experience. “Your mother, Cora. Except...at the time, I didn't know she was your mom.”

“Oh

,

” I reply, and I try to keep my face steady but honestly... some part of me is a little jealous. We all met the goddess that night in the temple with Ella – Roger met her, and me, but she had only spoken to Ella beyond a brief introduction that Ella insisted on giving us. And at the time it had made sense – Ella was her daughter, the one she wanted to see.

But now? Now that I know that she's my mother too? And that she only spoke to Ella in the temple, and then went to Roger later that night for a little chat?

I sigh a little through my nose, disappointed. Why does she want to talk to everyone but me?

"I know," Roger murmurs, reaching forward and brushing my cheek with his thumb. "It's half of why I didn't want to tell you, Cora," he continues, his face all sympathy. "I knew that it would... hurt."

"Well, what did she do?" I ask, pushing past my jealousy and truly wanting to know.

He sighs, looking off into the distance a little as he continues his story. "She didn't come in her bodily form," he says, "like she did in the temple. Instead, it was just...a vision of sorts, more like the baptism but... not quite." He shakes his head a little, at a loss to explain it. "But her message was perfectly clear."

I squeeze his hands again, letting him know that it's okay. That he can tell me. So Roger turns back to me and looks at me directly, not holding anything back.

"She told me," he says, "that

I

was chasing the wrong destiny. That my future was not in war and politics, as my brother's was – and you have to realize, that that was devastating to hear at the time, considering that we were in a war

–

and Dominic had just made me his Beta –

"

I nod, understanding, concentrating on nothing else but his words.

"But then she said," he twists his mouth a little, concentrating. "It's hard to know how to phrase it – because it wasn't precisely words – but that for the future of the world, I had to focus on family.

family -on finding my mate, and having children, and being a dad, and raising my kids well to be leaders of their generation."

"Oh," I say, blinking with surprise. And then I lean forward, finally getting it. "Oh, so you stopped calling me because..."

"Because I didn't think we could have kids, Cora..." he whispers, clutching my hands tightly. "And it fucking broke my heart to do it because I loved you I was obsessed with you,

you know that I

при

7

was and before she said anything to me I didn't even care about kids – didn't even really want

–

them it was always Dominic who was dying to be a dad, not me –

”

“Oh!” I say again, my eyes going wide.

“Don't listen to me,” Roger murmurs, apologetic, “I'm fucking it all up, Cora – I'm thrilled that you're pregnant, and not just because the goddess told me to be. I want –” He pauses. He pauses his confused language for a moment and steadies himself, choosing his next words carefully to make sure that I understand.

“I very much want this child, Cora” he tells me, pausing to ensure that I hear him, “and I can't wait to build a family with you.”

–

And I nod, because I do. I really get it. Honestly, I'm kind of in the same boat – I was like wise unsure if I wanted kids. But the moment I really understood that this was our child – mind and Rogers...

There's nothing else I wanted in the world.

“So, you stopped calling me,” I whisper, “because you thought...my mom told you to.”

–

“I was so fucking dumb

,

Cora,” Roger murmurs, his eyes going wide as he again runs his hand through his hair. “I was totally freaked out I didn't want to , but

when a goddess tells you to do something you feel compelled to do it – and I thought she was telling me to run from you, when she probably was telling me to run to you to take

you

directly

to

my stupid tiny bunk in that

—

—

awful little ship and knock you up right then and there –”

I can't help the little laugh that spills from me then, thinking about the nights I lay in my own ship bunk, aching for him. “Honestly,” I murmur,

“

I

probably would have let you.”

—

—

“See?” he says, laughing with me and leaning close. “She shouldn't

have

come to me at all – she should have just let things pan out the way they were going to should have known that I'm too stupid to understand a goddess's meanings and prophecy

—

”

I'm laughing harder now, shaking my head and considering that we could have saved ourselves so much grief if my mom had just butted out and left us to our own devices –

–

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Roger laughs along with me, and suddenly he's gathering me up in his arms, pulling me into his

Roger, misinterpreting my mom – me, crying for weeks and running to Hank for no reason –

And I'm kissing him, loving my sweet mate, who never stopped loving me –

When suddenly I realize –

“Oh my god,” I murmur, pulling back from him. “Roger, when you mated with me...”

He frowns at me, not understanding where I'm going with this.

“You...” I whisper, shocked. “You thought you were picking me despite the fact that we'd never have kids. You thought you were...defying a goddess.”

Roger's smile is slow, but deep, and he nudges me with his nose before pressing a long, slow kiss to my lips. “You were worth it, Cora)” he whispers. “I was ridiculous to try to stay away from you. I'd defy a thousand gods to live this life by your side. It's the only place I want to be.”

And I close my eyes, and kiss my mate, and let his love sweep through me.

Because even though it sometimes feels like my entire life I've been abandoned... Roger chose me.

Above everything else. Above his future, his family, the orders of a goddess, his destiny even... Roger chose me.

–

And as I kiss him, as I hold him close to me, I know that I chose him a long time ago, and now every part of me sings that despite all obstacles and hesitations – that choice was right, right, right.

Chapter 339 – Miracle

–
Miracle

Ella

“I can’t wait any longer” I say, two hours, one shower, and three sandwiches later. I stand up in the tiny steel kitchen, accidentally scattering the bag of chips I was picking at all over the counter. Honestly, I wasn’t even eating because I was as hungry

.

I was just trying to distract myself.

“Ella,” Sinclair sighs, reaching for my wrist.

“No!” I say

,

moving away from his grasp. “They’re being selfish! They know I’m dying to know!”

“Let them take their time!” Sinclair urges, standing up with me. I turn to glare at him and see him looking longingly at the hallway as well.

“See?” I say, pointing at him and narrowing my eyes. “You want to go too.”

Caught, he looks at me and grimaces a little. “Well, obviously I want to go talk to them, Ella,” he says, rolling his eyes. “He’s my brother as much as she’s your sister – I want to know as badly as you do –”

“Then let’s go!” I laugh, slapping my hand on the table and grinning down at the baby, who looks at me curiously. I laugh again at his expression and coo down at him. “Let’s go see your auntie and your Roger and your new cousin!”

“Ella,

”

Sinclair warns, stoic. “It’s not right. They’re entitled to their time alone!”

“Oh whatever,” I say, waving a hand to dismiss the Idea as I grabbing the half-empty bag of chips off the table. “She’s probably hungry. She’s a pregnant woman! She needs sustenance!”

And then, before he can stop me, I’m charging down the hall, determined to see my sister and learn everything.

“No, stop!” Sinclair calls half-heartedly behind me, and grin over my shoulder at him, because I know he could catch and stop me if he wanted to. I laugh then, hurrying towards the door to our room and reaching for it, thinking that my mate is just as nosy as I am – he just has more qualms about indulging in it.

rap lightly on the door before pushing it open. “Hello!” I sing, sweeping into the room, my heart swelling with happiness when I see Cora laying down on the bed, her head propped up against the pillows, her shirt pushed up a little and Roger pressing his ear low against her stomach.

“Hey!” she says, her face breaking out into a huge smile that does my heart so, so good to see,

especially after how incredibly sad she was when she arrived at the bunker. And as I cross to her I think, suddenly, about the insane swing that this day has taken.

まず

My face falls as I remember that we were attacked this morning – that I killed a man, ripped his

bedroom...

“Ella,” Cora gasps, her voice suddenly worried. Suddenly alert, Roger sits up, likewise looking at me with concern.

“No,” I say, letting myself sit down hard on the bed and doing my best to smile at them as Sinclair comes to the door. “It’s just been a...big day, hasn’t it?”

Cora clicks her tongue, realizing that she, too, forgot about my morning in the excitement of this afternoon, and she opens her arms to me so I can come in for a hug. Sinclair closes the door behind him and comes to my side, taking the baby from me before I move across the bed and allow Cora to wrap me in her arms, surrounding me with support.

Watching me closely, Sinclair sits down on the edge of the bed, the baby happily tucked against his arm. All right? he asks me, with a little concerned nudge to my mind.

I nod happily to him and then turn to Cora. "Come on," I say, poking her with my elbow. "Cheer me up, then, distract me from the fact that my baby was almost kidnapped this morning by telling me all about your miracle."

Cora laughs a little and complies with my request, looking down at her bare flat stomach and giving a little shrug. "There's nothing much to say yet, Ella,

"

she says. "I'm barely pregnant. If a woman came to me in this condition, just hardly having missed her period, I would honestly advise her not to tell any family or friends that she's pregnant yet. A lot can happen in these early stages."

"

No

to this baby,

"

Roger murmurs, definitive, returning his ear to her stomach. "This one's strong! "How do you know?" she asks, laughing and casually brushing his hair away from his face. "Because

,

"

he says, smug, "the child has incredible genes – the paternal line is especially fierce, not to mention good looking

Cora and I both laugh and she swats his head a little, making him sit up and grin at her.

Sinclair leans towards his brother, curious.

"

Do you feel the bond, Roger?

"

Roger turns towards him then, and

his face drops a little, making my stomach twist. Cora likewise notices that something is off and she sits forward, worried.

“The bond?” she asks, and then she looks at Sinclair, blinking, remembering. “Yes,” she says softly. “I remember you talking about the bond.” She turns to Roger now. “

You

can feel the same thing?”

“I can feel it,” he says to her, reassuring, but then he looks back at Sinclair. “But it feels....different to me,” he adds, “than the way you described it with Rafe.”

“Well, the important thing is that you feel it, yes?

”

I say eagerly, leaning forward, wanting it to be all right. Sinclair slides his hand over to take mine, reassuring.

“Ella’s right,” he says, looking only at his brother. “All bonds are different, it doesn’t have to be exactly like what I felt with Rafe. If

you

feel it, it’s real. But what do you mean when you say it’s different

?

”

“Well,” Roger says, turning back to Cora and then looking down at her stomach. “You could... communicate with the baby, from very early on. And you said that you knew that Rafe was a boy from the very first moment you sensed your link...”

“You’re not getting a sense of the baby’s sex?” I ask, leaning forward to stare at him

,

curious.

“No,” he murmurs, closing his eyes and trying harder.

“I feel the link, for sure. But I’m getting...” he sighs and opens his eyes, looking over at Sinclair. “Less information, I guess, than you did.”

Sinclair leans forward and puts a hand on his brother’s shoulder, not concerned but wanting to support him.

“Do you think it’s because the baby’s half human?” Cora asks, curious.

“Is it?” I ask, looking wide-eyed at her and then at Roger.

“What?” Cora asks

,

turning to me. “Ella, of course it is,” she says

,

gesturing towards herself.

“Well, I don’t know,” I say

,

shrugging. “Some kids get or express – more genes from their fathers than their mothers, and vice versa. Maybe it’s...90% wolf and 10% human, or the other way around. Or maybe it’s like...” I grin, laughing a little to myself, “a little Roger clone.”

Cora wrinkles her nose at me at the idea but Roger grins happily, and I laugh again at their opposing reactions.

I look to Sinclair, seeing what he thinks, but he just shrugs. “As far as I know, this is the first pregnancy of its kind,” he murmurs, smiling around at us. “Anything could happen.”

“Is it, though?” Cora murmurs, her hands going to her stomach, suddenly worried, Then she looks at me. “Ella...”

“What?”

”

I ask.

“Well,” she continues, hesitating and glancing at Roger. “I mean, we know that Roger is the father, because he can sense his bloodline. But...you don’t think it could be like...what mom did, do

you

? To our mothers? Where she... took one of her embryos, and put it in me, and then gave the father a nudge to go to their beds? I mean..this baby was probably conceived during that freak storm...” she says, biting her lip and looking at Roger, who goes pale.

“No

,

Cora,” I say, reaching out and grabbing her hand, shaking my head and making her look at me.

“

Mom asked Reina- and your mother too

,

I’m sure to carry us. They consented to it.

—

“But what

if

,” she says, hesitating again, “what if it wasn’t mom? What

if

,

”

she looks worriedly around at all of us again. “What if...it’s the god of darkness? Who also arranged for Rafe to be born? What if he...”

—

Cora bites her lip, looking down at her belly before continuing in a whisper. “What if he arranged for this baby too, and because he’s a different kind of god from our mother – didn’t bother to ask me if I consented to it? What if this baby is not mine at all?”

”

Chapter 340 – Reassurance

Ella

We all go a little pale, I think, as we consider the possibility that Cora, too, is an accidental – or not so accidental – surrogate.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” I say suddenly, shaking my head but a little shaken – I admit – by the idea that the baby was conceived during a storm that basically forced Roger and Cora off the road and into an empty room with not much in it besides a bed. It seems...a little too convenient to be chance, didn’t it?

“This is your baby, Cora,” I say with assurance, knowing it to be true.

“She’s right,” Roger says, nodding at Cora without doubt in his eyes. “You are this baby’s mother, and I’m its father, and that’s the end of the story. All right?”

Cora nods, but I can see her hesitate still.

“We’ll get answers, Cora,” Sinclair says quietly. “I agree with Ella and Roger – but if you’d like, we can consult the elders, like we did when we wanted information on how Ella was pregnant.”

“Oh,” she says, her eyebrows going up. “Yes, can we do that? That would be great.”

Sinclair nods, giving her a little smile and letting her know that he’ll set it up as soon as can be arranged. I realize something and gasp with excitement, bouncing a little on the bed.

“Maybe you’re a wolf, Cora!” I say, “like me! Maybe you just didn’t realize it! Maybe the same thing happened!”

“No, Ella,” Cora says, laughing at my excitement a little. “Our mother made it very clear to me on the temple steps that day – two daughters, one wolf, one human. I’m the human.”

“Oh,” I say, suddenly disappointed. But I take a deep breath and dismiss the thought, wrapping my arms around my sister’s shoulders and pressing my cheek to hers. “Well, whatever!” I say, cheerful. “Whatever this baby’s genetic makeup is, I’m excited. And we’ll love little ‘it’ so much.”

“I’m inclined to think the baby is a hybrid,” Sinclair says, carefully laying down on the bed and putting his head in my lap, resting the baby on the bed next to him, letting Rafe have some tummy time. “The first of its kind. Which is...very cool.”

Roger looks at him, curious. "Why do you think the baby's a hybrid?"

"The bond," Sinclair says, looking him in the eye. "If the baby were half human, it maybe makes some kind of logical sense that you only have access to half of the kind of link you would have with a baby who was genetically all wolf."

Roger cocks his head to the side, considering. "I wouldn't mind that," he murmurs, and then he looks at Cora and smirks. "I have a weak spot for humans. Cute ones, at least."

She wrinkles her nose at him and I sigh, glad we're on happier conversational ground again. "I think it's cool that we don't know the gender," I sigh, looking over at my little boy who works to hold his head up.

"You were happy enough to know Rafe's," Sinclair reminds me. "I seem to remember you tackling me in excitement when I told you he was a boy."

"Yes," I say, remembering it fondly. "But there's something good about the mystery too. The wait."

Cora laughs, drawing my attention back to her and I see her looking at Roger, grinning at the clear disappointment on his face. "You wish you knew," she guesses with a grin.

"Well, yeah," he says, huffing a sigh. "It's not usual for wolves to wait to know the sex. We always know. It's like someone telling you that it's Christmas but then having to wait six months to get the gift."

My sister laughs again and reaches forward to give him a little shove. "You just want to be assured it's a boy," she accuses, her grin deepening. "You won't be able to rest until you know."

Roger smirks at Cora, rueful, but doesn't deny it. "You don't want a girl!?" I gasp, my hands flying to my heart. "A lovely little girl!?"

"You wanted a boy," Sinclair reminds me, laughing as well. "Yes," I agree, shooting him a very tiny glare before turning back to Roger.

"But I also wanted a girl."

"How can you want both?" he asks, confused but laughing anyway. "Because!" I declare, "you just can!" Everyone is laughing now and I turn to Cora, nudging her with my elbow. "Back me up here!"

"Sorry, sis," she says, quirking a little smile at me. "I'm team girl. If we have a boy I'm handing it immediately off to Roger," she declares, though we all know she doesn't mean

it as she pretends to dust her hands off and be done with it.

“Why are you leaning towards a girl,” Sinclair asks, amused and curious.

“Because,” she says to him with a smile. “Girls get all the good stuff. Dress-up and books and imagination and mermaids,” she shrugs. “Boys just get football. And turtles.” She sticks out her tongue to let them know what she thinks of that.

We all laugh at this and I tuck my head against my sister’s shoulder, pressing a quick kiss to it first, so terribly excited for her.

“If the child is hybrid,” I consider aloud. “Do you think you’ll be pregnant for six months? Or nine? Or... something between?”

“I don’t know,” she murmurs, stroking her stomach again and then transferring her hand to Roger’s hair as he bends down to press his ear to her stomach again, listening for the baby, though I don’t know what he’ll hear at this point. It’s probably just an embryo right now.

“Well, you’re probably amongst the few people on earth with the best guess,” I murmur, my eyes on Roger, so excited for him to become a dad alongside my sister. “As one of the very few OBGYN’s in the world who work with both wolf and human populations.

“Sure,” she sighs, “but I’m not geneticist. We have a lot to learn.”

“That’s okay,” I say, looking over at my mate and my baby as I speak. “But if I have learned anything at all from my own surprise wolf pregnancy...it goes faster than you think. Try to remember everything...”

My mate smiles at me, and I at him, and then I close my eyes with my head still pillowed on my sister’s shoulder.

As I relax the memories of this morning nag at me a little bit, dragging against my consciousness and trying to force me to remember that someone is coming for my child – someone powerful, and determined, and clever.

But in this moment, I choose to dismiss those fears and lean into the love.

Because there is so much of my life that has been so incredibly lucky and I choose, now, to believe in the strength of my family and hope for better times to come.

Because they will come. We’ll make them come, the four of us, for Rafe and little “it.” We will build the best world for them, no matter what it takes.

Chapter 341 – A Quiet Night

Ella

We had dinner a little later, and Henry got to give Cora his shocked congratulations on her pregnancy. His eyes were wet, a little, at the thought of his second grandchild, but it was all for joy. It was a wonderful evening that we all spent together surprising after such a horrible morning.

Tomorrow, I know, we have a lot to think about and decide. But tonight? Tonight I just want to sleep in my mate's arms and get some rest under the knowledge that nobody is going to attack us and try to take my baby.

I'm tired, then, when Sinclair and I head back to our room with little Rafe in my arms, already asleep. As Sinclair opens the door for us I give a little wave to my sister and Roger, who are sleeping a few doors down.

"Aw," I say, looking up at Sinclair as we walk into the room. "I'm jealous. I want to get knocked up."

"What!?" Sinclair exclaims, laughing as he moves across the room to the little table where we've unpacked our clothes, eager to get ready for bed.

I pout as I move to the little makeshift cradle waiting by our bed that Henry instructed Sinclair's men to make for us this afternoon, laying my sleeping baby down on the thin, firm mattress waiting there for him.

"I'm just a little jealous!" I declare, laughing a little.

"Ella," Sinclair sighs, pulling his shirt over his head and coming over to me. I turn to my mate, eager, and wrap my arms around his neck, smiling up at him. "You do realize that you just gave birth to our perfect little baby, and that it was an incredibly complicated and dramatic pregnancy. Are you really so eager to be pregnant again?"

"No," I say, grinning up at him. "That's not what I said. I don't want to be pregnant at least, not right now. Not yet. I just want to get knocked up!"

"Okay," Sinclair replies, laughing again and smiling down at me so broadly that it brings out all the little crinkles around his eyes that I love." Please explain, then, my love, the difference between the terms."

"I just think it would be nice," I say softly, "to just..." I shrug, "not be trying to get pregnant, and then one day poof! Surprise!" I look up into his eyes, still smiling, "suddenly knocked up!"

“Hmm,” he says, beginning to stroke my hair and, I think, understand. But he wants to hear more. “And why, Ella,” he asks, “does that sound so appealing?”

“Because,” I continue, taking a deep breath and resting my face against his chest. “You know I love everything about our story, Sinclair – we never would have met, or had our baby, if we hadn’t been thrown into that situation. But there was so much that was stressful about how Rafe was conceived – I had to spend so much money, and just hope that it worked, and frankly the idea that my sister put your defrosted sperm in me when you were just like ” somewhere else on the earth.

He laughs now and I can feel him nodding. “Yes,” he agrees. “I see. A little...less romantic and intimate than it could be.”

“Precisely,” I say. “Roger and Cora... it’s been so complicated for them, but there is something beautiful about them making that little miracle baby because they loved each other so much.”

I feel Sinclairs knuckles graze my face and look up at him again.

“I’ll give you as many children as you want, Ella,” he murmurs softly, “and they will all be conceived in love. Rafe too.”

“I know,” I say, smiling up at him. “ I’m excited. It will happen one day.” And a memory flashes in my mind of the prophecy the priests showed me, of our little family of four. Could that really be possible? I mean, the eldest child in that vision was a dark-haired boy just like my sweet Rafe. Would the rest come true as well?

“I mean,” Sinclair says, interrupting my reverie and sliding his hands down my back to grip my ass. “If you’re that eager to get knocked up – I’m right here and there is a bed – I am very happy to oblige I laugh, biting my lip as I look up at him and pressing my body closer to his. But then I hesitate. “Let’s wait, a little,” I say quietly, “before we think about a second child. Until all of this,” I say, waving a hand to encapsulate the bunker and all of the reasons why we’re here, “is sorted. Is that all right?”

“Yes, Ella,” Sinclair says, bending down a little further to get a better grip on my ass and using the leverage to pick me up in his arms. I laugh and wrap my legs around his waist, hands looped casually behind his neck. “You control the timeline. In the meantime,” he growls playfully as he moves his face closer to mine, “we’ll just...practice.”

“Good,” I murmur softly against his lips, a little thrill running through me as I remember that enough time has passed. I can take my mate to bed -really to bed – anytime I want now. But as I think about it, I pull away for a second, curious. “Dominic, what do wolves use for birth control?”

“Self-restraint,” he murmurs against my shoulder, carrying me the few steps to the bed and sitting down hard on it, taking me with him. He rolls then and I laugh as he presses me down against the mattress, kissing down my neck. “We’re horrible at it,” he adds, “that’s why there are legions of wolf babies out there...”

I laugh again and lean my head back, enjoying the feeling of him running his lips over me, his hands under my shirt now, warm against my stomach. I idly play with his hair as I force the conversation to continue. “But really, love,” I ask. “If we decide to wait a little bit for another child, how do we make sure that happens? Because, you know we’re not going to be able to practice abstinence. If that’s the only solution we’re going to pop out a kid every six months.”

Sinclair laughs at the idea and then sits up, pulling me with him and then tugging my shirt up over my head and looking hungrily down at my mostly- naked torso. He quickly un-snaps my bra, pulling it off my shoulders and tossing it aside before laying me back down on the mattress. “There are herbs,” he informs me, kissing down my stomach now as he raises a hand to hold my breast, his thumb idly flicking over my nipple and sending a little shiver through me. “But you won’t need them for a while. Wolf bodies are more diligent than humans about making sure that there’s time between pups. It’s very unlikely that you will ovulate at all while you’re still breastfeeding.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised.

“Mmmhmm,” he says, tugging at the waistband of my pants now, getting distracted from the conversation. “Our pups are rare as you know. So the female wolf body is designed to ensure that the pup gets all the nutrients it needs before making a new one. You don’t have to worry about it for a while, but we can talk to Cora if you want _”

“Later,” I murmur, looking down at my mate as he slides my pants and underwear down off my body. Then I’m panting in anticipation as Sinclair slides one of my knees over his shoulders, dipping his head down to give me a long, thorough lick just where I want him to. I moan a little, letting my head fall back on the pillow. “Let’s worry about all of that... later...” I whisper.

My mate murmurs his agreement and then, fully distracted, gets to work.

Chapter 342 – Bunker Life

Ella

Sinclair and I wake up late the next morning and frankly I'm grateful that everyone let us sleep in. We had to get up to feed Rafe, of course, but even with that? It's the most sleep I've gotten in a long time.

"Morning," I murmur, turning over to Sinclair and slinging a leg up over his hip, feeling just...ridiculously relaxed for someone who fought off a pack of kidnappers in her bedroom yesterday.

Sinclair doesn't say anything, just growls a hungry little greeting and pulls my naked body closer to his, rolling over me a little so that I can feel the delicious weight of him on top of me as he kisses my neck, my shoulder, and then my mouth. "We're skipping breakfast," he murmurs, sliding his hand leisurely down the length of my body. "I have different idea for how we can spend the time -"

"Nooooo," I moan in protest, my stomach audibly growling in support. I need foood!"

Sinclair laughs and pulls away from me then. "Am I not sustenance enough for you?" he asks, pretending to be offended. "Here," he says, offering his arm, bulging with muscles, "take a bite. It will keep you going."

I bare my teeth and lean forward towards it, making my mate laugh, but then I just press a quick kiss to the arm and push him away, reaching for the baby who is starting to fuss in his cradle at the sound of our voices.

"As delicious as you are," I call over my shoulder to Sinclair as I lean down to scoop Rafe into my arms, "the baby and I need pancakes."

"Then pancakes you shall have,"

Sinclair murmurs yawning and crossing to the little metal bathroom door in the corner of the room. "But I hope that you are aware that these will be bunker pancakes," he adds, twisting the knob and pushing his way through, by which I mean...plain toast."

I laugh, nodding to indicate that that's fine by me, and then I spend a few sweet minutes alone with my son, talking softly to him while I feed him his own breakfast, taking my time looking over, admiring his little face and his thick thatch of black hair, mussed from sleep.

I sigh a little, thinking that this will surely be a busy, complicated day. But with sweet starts like this...how can it end badly?

Sinclair

A little later in the morning we gather in the conference room at the end of the bunker's long hall, our teams ready to come up with a plan for a counter- attack on the Cult. I keep my face impassive as I look around at the men who we have brought with us, but honestly I'm proud of them. Many worked through the night to develop our reconnaissance, to make a plan.

A little pang of guilt runs through me as I realize that they were working, losing sleep, while I was relaxing and... well, doing a bit more than relaxing with my mate. But...

Well, I'm the boss. I built this system, I put in the hours in my younger years to get to where I am. I am allowed to indulge, a little, in some of the privileges of being in charge – even if my constant instinct is to work, and to push, and to keep going. Ella and Rafe need my attention as well, just as much

as my business and political life. And considering what Roger and Cora went through yesterday, they needed me last night too.

"You're doing fine, Dominic," my father murmurs to me as he rolls up to my side, his voice quiet enough that no one is likely to hear.

"What?" I ask, surprised.

My dad gives me a little smirk, just for a moment, before placing some paperwork on the table and beginning to sort through it. "You think I can't read the emotions on your face, even when you work to keep it clear? I'm your father, boy. We still have a bond, even if it's changed with time."

I smile, then, and clasp a hand on my father's shoulder, grateful for him. Roger comes over to us and gives us a sharp little nod, which we both return, and then I laugh a little bit as I realize how much of our bodily movements we all have in common. My dad laughs a little too.

"What?" Roger asks, a little out of the loop, but I shake my head at him a little to let him know he's not missing anything big and he just shrugs it off, leaning in front of me to look at the plans that dad came up with last night.

Roger stands up straight, though, when Cora and Ella come through the door, saying warm greetings to everyone they encounter, Ella showing off the baby to anyone who wants to come greet him and Cora handing out little cups of coffee that they thoughtfully made.

"Uh-oh," Roger says, his eyes wide as he looks at the girls. "What?" I ask, looking

between Roger and our mates, trying to figure out the problem.

“Dominic,” Roger says, his voice tight, “do you not see the issue here?”

he gestures towards them. Frowning, a little disturbed that I don’t, I shake my head.

“Dom,” Roger sighs, scrubbing his hand down his face swiftly in a mix of worry and frustration. “I’m going to forgive you for this, since you’ve been a little...hypnotized by Ella since the moment she walked into your life – ”

“Wha-!” I start, but Roger gives me a significant look and I shut my mouth, frowning and crossing my arms over my chest but letting him continue.

“Seriously, Dom,” he continues, speaking quickly, “Ella’s amazing, and I love her, but you let her get away with things that you wouldn’t let anyone get away with -”

“She’s usually right!” I protest, but he continues speaking, cutting me off.

“She is and I’m not calling your judgement into doubt – but I have had the privilege of getting to know both Ella and Cora without being in love with one of them from the jump –

I raise my eyebrow at Roger, but he ignores me.

“And,” Roger continues, “I thus am more aware of what they can do when they combine their powers. You have a sweet spot for Ella, you think she’s funny – and now Cora’s got me all wrapped up -”

I smirk, and look over at the two girls, realizing that he’s right.

“And,” I continue, speaking his thoughts for him, “with the two of us under their thumbs? If they want to, they’re going to control this meeting.”

“Yah,” Roger replies, sighing and folding his arms as he turns to watch both of them, as I’m currently doing..

“Shit,” I murmur, shaking my head. Ella turns to me by chance now, catching both of us looking at her, and her face bursts into a wicked little grin before she replaces it with a sweet smile and blows me a kiss, taking a paper cup of coffee off of Cora’s tray and handing it to another one of our men.

“Oh no,” Roger moans, seeing Ella’s changing expression. “They’ve become aware of their power – they know – ”

“Shiiiiit,” I murmur again, shaking my head even harder now.

“This is why,” Roger snaps, turning to frown at me, “we never should have gotten involved with sisters – what the hell were we thinking – we should have mated with two women who are mortal enemies so that they can never team up against us – ”

“You’re right,” I agree, sighing. “But it’s too late now. Unless you want to give yours up,” I quip, turning to grin at him.

“Not on your life,” Roger murmurs, smirking. “I got the hot one.”

“Whatever,” I laugh, knowing he’s wrong but happy to let him think that he’s right. That’s the way one should love their mate – believing them incomparable. I’m glad he sees Cora like that, the same way I see Ella.

Ready to begin, I clap my hands, loudly, calling the group to order. As everyone shuffles around to take their places at the table, I’m grateful that Roger has made me newly aware that Ella and Cora came to this meeting not as innocent bystanders, but as people very intent on having their say in the plans. Indeed, they take two diminutive seats from us as far away as possible, Rafe bundled warmly in Ella’s arms.

But I note, as I see them sit, that even though the seats they choose are at the end of the group, those seats could also be considered the head of the table.

And they are not going to like, at all, the direction in which we’re heading.

I grin a little, preparing for a fight.

Chapter 343 – Preparations

Sinclair

“All right,” I say, keeping half an eye on trouble and sister-trouble as I look around the room at my assembled team. “We’re here today to make a concrete plan regarding our next moves against the Cult that attacked our pack and attempted to kidnap my child. Everyone here has been briefed on the events that occurred yesterday. I applaud your work in coming up with the information we need to make the next best step we can. But now it’s time to act. Dad?”

I turn the group’s attention to him, eager to hear what he has to say regarding the reconnaissance that we assigned teams to complete yesterday and last night.

“Right,” my father starts, leaning forward in his chair and glancing over his papers, though I know he’s memorized every word on them. “Our capture of a Dark Priest yesterday morning resulted in a great deal of new information, if not yet definitive answers regarding how to stop these attacks. However, one of the most significant pieces of information that we’ve gathered came in last night.”

I listen while my father speaks but keep my eyes on everyone in the room, wanting to judge my men’s physical reactions to the information. I know that we’re going to need to put together an assault team at some point, and I’m going to want the best and most engaged on it. At my father’s last line, everyone seems to perk up a little, but I spot a few men whose eyes burn with a particular hunger at this turn.

“Last night, there was significant consideration of the fact that, while Ella and Dominic shifted into their wolves to attack the men who came for Rafe yesterday, the attackers themselves did not shift. I want to particularly applaud Conner O’Mally for noticing this particular fact.”

All eyes move, then, to a bulky red- haired young man who nods humbly, even when a slight blush at the recognition colors his pale cheeks. I nod at him, marking him mentally as one I might want by my side.

“At least one of the men,” my father continues, “would have had to stay in his human body in order to carry the child, of course. But the others continued the assault without shifting which, as we all know, is unique. And put them at a particular disadvantage.”

Ella catches my eye here and we raise our brows at each other. We were caught up in the moment, of course, but I feel, quite suddenly, a little stupid that neither of us noticed this. It’s true – considering the numbers we went up against, it should have been a more difficult fight and it would have been, had they shifted.

“There was speculation,” Henry continues, “that these men never intended to take my

grandson yesterday, that they were, instead, a distraction meant to get Dominic and Roger out of the room so that the captured Priest could escape – which he did.”

My father nods a little, considering this fact and the entire room listens eagerly, on the edge of our seats.

“However,” dad continues, looking now to a slim dark-haired young man down the table, “Simon suggested an alternative. Simon?” Henry invites, “if you would?”

“Okay,” Simon says, leaning forward, I think a little put on the spot but responding ably to the pressure. “The men who came into the bedroom, according to reports,” he nods politely to my mate here and she smiles at him, “moved with incredible speed and were able to break glass that they should not have been able to break, which was installed recently against just such an assault. The obvious conclusion here is that the attackers called upon the magic that the members of this Cult are known for in order to aid them in their mission.”

“Ella,” I say, breaking in and turning towards her now, wanting her input. Does this line up with your memory of the event?”

“Yes,” she says, sitting up and looking around. “It was incredible how fast they entered and how they came through the window. It is difficult to describe but...it was not something the average wolf could do unaided.”

I give her a sharp nod in thanks and she smiles at me in return. I can’t help the little smile that twitches at my lips then, though I usually work hard to keep all of my emotions off my face while I work.

She’s just so...cute. Damn, but it’s hard to keep a straight face around her. Roger’s right – I let her get away with more than anyone else.

I ignore these thoughts and turn back to Simon, giving him a nod and inviting him to continue. As he begins I consider that he’s a little too small for an assault team, though he’s clearly clever. I make a mental note to assign him more rigorous tasks to see how he does.

“One potential explanation for this,” Simon continues, “the lack of shifting, as well as the use of magic – is rooted in my understanding of how certain priestesses of the Goddess operate. It is not a common practice, but there are certain enclaves where priestesses worship remote ones, monasteries really – where priestesses actually bind their wolves in order to differently access the magic that would allow them to communicate with their wolf and transform into it.”

“Oh,” Cora says, clearly surprised, though she’s the only one who responds aloud. The

rest of us shift uncomfortably in our chairs. It would be ...incredibly painful, and isolating, I consider, to choose to turn away from the wolf that lives inside me and forcibly bind him. An act of cruel self-flagellation that, I know, every other wolf in this room shudders to consider.

Inside of me my own wolf bares his teeth at the idea, snapping at it. I run a mental hand down his black fur, assuring him that I'd never do it.

"How do you know this," Roger asks, sharp but curious. "I've never heard of this practice."

"Um..." Simon says, looking down at the table for a moment, perhaps a little embarrassed. "My mother...lives in one of these communities. I was born there."

My eyebrows raise in surprise. I hired Simon three years ago, selected him for his intelligence as well as his hard work and potential. We did a thorough background check on him and while I knew he came from a remote region, I was unaware of his unique connections to a priestess of the Goddess. I make a mental note to have a further discussion with him, both about his background and about transparency.

But still, even as part of me rankles at not having all the information, another part of me understands. If practices like this exist, they surely happen in remote communities that would otherwise be shunned. Perhaps Simon kept his secret because he didn't want to expose his mother, or have his fellow workers mark him as a misfit.

I catch Simon's eye and nod to him, warm enough to let him know that he did right by telling us but firm enough for him to understand that we will be having further conversations about this. Simon holds my gaze and nods in return.

Then, I turn back to my father. "This is significant, if true," I say aloud. I know what I think it means, but I want his opinion before I voice it, so I nod to him, giving my dad back the floor.

"The consideration here," Henry continues, "is that we may have a significant advantage over these priests if we attack in a large force. If we are facing cult members who do not have access to their wolves, even if they do have access to magic, there is a good chance that the sheer physical force of us could be overwhelming. My suggestion would be to move fast, now, before they figure out what we know."

I nod, agreeing, pleased that my own thoughts are aligned with my father's. We move tonight, as soon as we can," I declare. "Roger and I will take lead."

"Absolutely not," Ella growls, and I turn to see my little rose-gold mate standing up and looking at me fiercely. "I will not allow it."

Everyone freezes, awkward, not knowing what to do. Honestly, it's the first time they've seen anyone counter me. But then again, it's the first time Ella's come to the table.

Ella and I glare at each other, locked in a stare from which we are both determined to never back down.

Chapter 344 – Counter Moves

Sinclair

Cora breaks the tension between Ella and I, but unfortunately not in a way that benefits me.

“I agree,” she says, standing next to her sister, her eyes locked on Roger’s. I sigh inwardly, my wolf grumbling with discontent, as I realize that Roger’s warning at the start of this meeting was quite apt. Each on their own is willful, but together they’re a disruptive force.

“It’s too dangerous,” Cora continues, shaking her head, “we don’t know enough about this magic to send anyone in like this – people could be seriously hurt.”

She says “people” but I know, of course, that she really only means Roger and maybe me. Cora is not cold she cares about the other team members, but as a newly-mated newly- pregnant woman, I imagine that her main concern is, at this point, quite narrow.

“We have to press the advantage when we can, Cora,” Roger explains, angry but wanting her to understand. “Time is not on our side -” Cora opens her mouth to argue but I interrupt.

“Enough,” I snap, glaring at her and at Ella. Sit, I command Ella firmly, mind to mind. Her eyes flare at the authority in my voice, both audible and internal, but slowly I shake my head at her, communicating as coolly as I can that this is not the time to press me.

I see their concern – I share it, honestly – but this is not the time for me to back down in front of my men. I hold her gaze steadily, not relenting, and slowly Ella sits herself back into her seat. Seeing her back off, Cora hesitates but then does the same.

The tight muscle of Ella’s jaw lets me know that this fight is not over, even if she has consented to sit and, as she settles back in the chair, I give her a deep nod, letting her know that I will hear her. Just Not Now.

Then, I turn back to my men, moving on as if it didn’t happen.

“And where do we plan to strike?” Roger asks, his voice tight but likewise working to get back to business. He looks down at the paperwork our father provided and, I think, figures it out based on the few maps that my father has placed on the table.

“The sewer,” dad says, pointing at some underground schematics of the city which indicate where, precisely, entrances and exits were built for workers and maintenance in the sewer system. “The priest we lost yesterday set up significant shop down there and it’s likely that he cannot operate

without some of the materials he left. If we want to capture him again – and, I propose that that is our best move forward then our best shot is to start there. Best case scenario he is still there, gathering the significant number of supplies he left, which will take a long time to move out. Worst, we can begin to learn his practices and his scent.”

“Good,” I agree, nodding. “Any opposing suggestions for how to proceed?” I ask, looking at my oldest and most established men to see if there are any other ideas. I deliberately do not look at Ella and Cora. But no one says a word.

“It’s decided then,” I say, standing and crossing my arms over my chest, looking to the side at my brother. “ Roger and I will pick a team and take lead. We’ll give word when we are ready.”

I decidedly refuse to look at Ella and Cora as the men filter out of the room, some coming to have a quick word with me before moving on to their individual team tasks which they already know they must take up. Some move to check the armory and prepare the assault, others gather to discuss the best way to approach the sewers, and still more move to another room to prepare to select members of the team. Those, I know, are the ones who I will be joining in a few minutes.

But before that...

My father gathers up the papers in front of him and tucks them into the side pocket of his wheelchair before looking up at me, giving me a wry little smile. “I’ll see you two in a few minutes?” he asks..

“We’re coming now, dad,” Roger growls, turning away from the last of the men and towards the two of us.

“No, you’re not,” dad replies cheerfully, beginning to spin his chair away. “You boys know that I miss your mother but...” he laughs a little as he begins to roll towards the door. “Not quite as much, in moments like this.”

Dad gives us a little wave and rolls through the door next to which Cora and Ella stand, my baby boy still sleeping happily in my mate’s arms. As soon as dad rolls out with the last of the men, Ella shuts the door and turns to renew her glare.

I fold my arms over my chest again, glaring back, ready to renew our stalemate but Roger interrupts, walking quickly to Cora’s side.

“Cora,” he breathes, shaking his head, shocking me with the apology on his lips. “I’m sorry, Cora – I know you’re upset – ”

“Upset!” she gasps, and Ella spins her head to look at Cora, breaking my gaze. I blink, surprised. I had honestly thought we were going to be locked in that for...I don't know. Days?

Perhaps Roger knows how to handle them better than me. As they start to argue, I begin to slowly walk over and join the group.

“Upset doesn't cover it, Roger!” Cora spits, glaring up at him and brushing away the hand he attempts to put on her shoulder. “We find out that we're having a baby and the first thing you want to do is rush off to get killed!?”

“We're not going to get killed,” Roger replies, stating it in a breezy way that clearly lights a fire in his mate.

“You don't know that!” Cora shouts. ”

Damn it, Roger!” She steps closer to him and I can see tears in her eyes now. “How am I supposed to let you walk out of her and put your life on your line! When we we finally -”

And my heart twists when I see Cora relent, a little, closing the distance between them and fisting her hands in his shirt as if she'll never let him go.

I turn to Ella then, standing a few feet from me, hoping for the same kind of honest communication, but when I meet her eyes they're still steel.

“Oh no you don't,” she says, pointing a finger up into my face and setting her jaw. “Just because Cora is crying and is going to let Roger talk her into it doesn't mean I will.”

Cora gasps and turns to her, “I'm not.

“Yes you are,” Ella snaps, flashing Cora a little glare. “He's got you all softened up with an apology and now you're puddy in his hands.”

Cora gasps again, betrayed this time instead of surprised, and steps away from Roger, coming to Ella's side.” She's right!” Cora cries. “You softened me up!”

Roger and I both sigh sharply through our noses, turning to look at each other, frustrated, and he gives me a little shrug that clearly says well, it was worth a shot. I nod consideringly, giving him credit for trying. Then, I turn back to Ella and try another tactic: brutal honesty.

“Ella,” I say, sliding my hands into my pockets and meeting her angry gaze. This is happening. There is no other way. We're not going to send our men out there without us – Roger and I are each stronger than four of them put together, it's in our bloodline. This

is part of our jobs, this is why we're in charge. There is no other choice."

Her face falls a little then, and I can see that I'm making her understand. I take a step towards her then, my heart breaking to see her so upset, so worried. But it was the truth: we have to go. They need us.

"Can't you," she says, her eyes darting a little as she thinks, "can't you just delay – by a day or two – just until you get more information – "

"We will lose the opportunity," I reply, taking another step closer and reaching a hand out towards her, begging her to see the truth of it. And then, as I look down into the face of my darling mate, I see her lip begin to tremble as she comes to understand. And slowly, she raises her hand and takes mine, and then in a flash she's pressed against me, her free arm wrapped around my waist, and I wrap mine around her shoulders, wanting to press her tight against me but, of course, not wanting to crush the baby between us.

"I don't want you to go," she murmurs, and I can hear a little hitch in her throat. "I can't lose you. We have so much...we just got safe..."

"You won't lose me," I murmur, bending down to kiss the top of her head, meaning every word of it. "I promise, Ella. I promise."

"So do I," Roger says, turning to Cora, and I turn a little to watch them, seeing him step towards her as well.

But Cora surprises me by stepping back. "Oh, I don't need your promise," she says, holding up a hand between them. "Because I'm going with you."

Chapter 345 – Parting

Ella

I blink, surprised, when I hear a laugh tumble from Roger's mouth. Honestly, I had expected anything else. Yelling? Yes. Begging? Sure. Stern orders? Absolutely.

Anything, really, except the low chuckle that falls from Roger's lips as he leans back and puts his hands in his pockets. "I'm serious," Cora says, crossing her arms and glaring at him. "I'm going with you. You need me."

"Cora," Roger says, shaking his head. "I need you, absolutely. But if you think for a second that I'm letting my pregnant mate climb into a sewer with me as part of an attack on an unknown enemy.

"Well if you wouldn't let me do it, why on earth would I let you do it!" she counters, angry.

"Because I'm not pregnant!" Roger shouts back, angry, as if it's obvious. Sinclair shifts a little, moving behind me – his arms still around my shoulders – so we can both watch.

"We're pregnant," Cora shouts, pointing between herself and him. "This is not a me or a you kind of thing! I am not interested in single motherhood on what is essentially day two of this pregnancy!"

"Cora," Roger sighs, putting an exhausted hand on his forehead. "This is my job. This is what we do. You can't ask me to back away from it."

"Why not, when you're doing the same to me?" Cora counters, shaking her head at him, being stubborn. I bite my lip, torn between wanting to support my sister and frankly agreeing with Roger. There's absolutely no way in hell that Cora should be going on this mission.

"What are you talking about?" Roger asks, frustrated. "I can help," she says, pointing at herself, "I'm a doctor. You guys are going to get all torn up out there – you need me!"

Have we had enough of this? Sinclair asks, speaking to me mind-to-mind as I lean back against him, tense as we watch our siblings argue. When do I interrupt?

Give them another second, I reply internally, wanting them to figure this out on their own if they can. But even if it did come to something as simple as a vote? It's three to one. Cora's staying home. "We're trained in field medicine."

Roger says, waving a dismissive hand. "It will be enough to hold us through it until we can get home –"

“People could die!” Cora counters, you could die! And how the hell would I feel, for the rest of my life – what would I tell our child – when I remembered that I could have been there and saved you?”

Roger’s face falls at this thought and I see him falter, no knowing how to reply. And frankly I’m torn by the idea as well if Sinclair died, and I could have done something...

I don’t know if I’d survive it myself. Now? Sinclair asks me, his own inner voice dark and sad. Let me, I reply, and I step forward, putting a hand on Cora’s arm.

“Cora,” I whisper and, after a second, my sister drags her eyes away from her mate to look at me. Slowly, I shake my head, “Cora, you can’t go.”

“Why not?” she growls, stern. “Because,” I reply, with a little shrug. “Your argument goes both ways. How the hell would Roger feel if you got killed and your baby with you – and he could have kept you safe?” a

Roger audibly groans at the idea and has to turn away from us, tortured by it, raising a hand to cover his face for a moment as he collects himself. Cora turns to look at him, surprised, I think, by the rare display of intense emotion. These Sinclair brothers – they’re so steady on the surface, but we always have to remember that still waters run deep.

Cora moves towards him, placing her hands on Roger’s shoulders, turning him back towards her and wrapping her arms around his waist. She lays her head on his chest when he puts his own arms around her. “I don’t like this,” she whispers against his shirt, “I hate it, Roger.”

“I know,” he murmurs, his lips against his hair. “I’m sorry. But Cora, I promise you it will be all right.”

“Is it always going to be like this?” she asks, looking up at him. “Is this what I’ve gotten myself into? Battle after battle, fight after fight? Constantly worried about whether or not you’re coming home to me, to...us?”

I feel my own stir of intense emotions at her question, looking up at Sinclair and meeting his eyes as he shakes his head steadily at me. No, he says, firm in my mind. We will have peace. I will bring you peace. Just...a little further.

“I promise, Cora,” Roger replies, tightening his arms around her. “I promise it will be all right.”

Sinclair turns me, then, and I nod, letting him shepherd me out of the room and giving the two of them a moment alone. My mate takes my hand as we pass through the door

and head down the hall, both of us silent, me looking down at my baby and feeling, I'm sure, almost precisely the same feelings that Cora is at the moment.

"Is it different now?" Sinclair asks me as we head into our little room.

"Hmm?" I ask, brought out of my thoughts at his words. "Now that he's born," Sinclair says, nodding to the baby as I carry him over to his little makeshift crib. "This isn't the first time you've sent me off to battle. Does it feel different, now that he's a little person instead of part of you?"

"He was always a little person," I murmur with a little smile as I lay Rafe down, "since very early on, he was my little guy. But no," I reply, straightening and looking up at my mate, who stands close to me. "It's always horrible, Dominic. I'm never going to get used to it. That time we thought you died..."

Tears spring to my eyes at the memory. He shushes me a little, pressing a finger to my mouth, and I nod, understanding. It's not that he doesn't want me to engage with these feelings these memories – he just....

Well, we both know that I don't need to go there. Not really. He will come back to me today, as he did before. As he always does.

Slowly, seeing me pull myself together, Sinclair gives me a deep nod. "Brave little mate," he whispers, leaning down to press a kiss to my mouth. I wrap my arms around his neck, clinging close, never wanting to let him go.

The day passes quickly, with all of the preparation, and Cora and I watch mostly in silence. We do what we can to help, but Sinclair has built a very capable team. Frankly, they don't need much, which is worse for us. We're both helpers – it's our instinct to pitch in.

"I hate this," Cora growls next to me as we watch the men pack all of their supplies into the cars they'll be taking.

"It's for the best," I sigh, leaning my shoulder against hers as I bounce Rafe in my arms, trying to get him to stop crying. It's almost as if he knows his dad is going away. "No battlefields for baby," I say passively, smiling down at my boy.

Cora laughs darkly and I look over to see her rolling her eyes. "Honestly, Ella," she says, shaking her head. "You were in like, three battlefield situations when you were pregnant."

"True," I say, quirking my head to the side. "Sinclair probably should have locked me up in a bunker long ago."

"Truer words never spoken," Sinclair says as he walks over to us, smirking. "Is it time?" I ask, stepping close as Roger likewise comes near.

"It is," Sinclair replies, pulling me close and looking first into my face and then down at the baby. "Calm down, baby trouble," he murmurs, reaching out a hand to trace a large finger across Rafe's forehead. "I'll be home soon."

"You'd better be," I growl, glaring at my mate and tilting my head up for a kiss, which he gives me.

"Don't eat all the snacks," he whispers, giving me a wink and a smack on the ass as he begins to turn away. "We'll be hungry when we come home."

"No promises!" I call after him, grinning as I watch him walk away. I turn, then, and watch Cora let Roger go as well, my heart breaking for her a little bit.

"See you soon, gorgeous," Roger says with a wave as he moves towards the car. And I step closer to my sister, taking a deep breath, sending a quick prayer to the Goddess that this isn't the last time we see them alive.

Chapter 346 – The Lair

Sinclair

Things move quickly once we arrive at the point of entry. Everything has been planned to the letter so that even our arrival is quiet, covert, in the darkest hours of the night when we're least likely to be seen. Each of the cars filled with our men has parked at different points in the surrounding blocks of the city so that when we do converge on the sewer, we do it in near silence and darkness.

Roger and I are there first and, in preparation, we contact our father at home to let him know that we're in position. Once we're in the sewers, our ability to speak with him will be limited 1 it will just be us down there, along with whatever we find.

Dad replied readily, letting us know that all is well – if not a little tense – at the bunker. I smiled a little at the message, thinking of Ella and Rafe safe and worried. Of Cora pacing anxiously, waiting for Roger. It's not that I like thinking of them being upset but, well. It's nice to be missed. Nice to be able to think of someone at home loving you, wanting you to come back.

“Ready?” Roger asks, giving me a nudge and pointing down the road to where the first of our men are begin to approach. We meet each other's eyes, knowing that it's time. I give a slow, deep nod to my brother, and then he slides the manhole cover to the side so that I can slip in. I drop to the floor of the curving sewer below, all of my senses on high alert for anything odd, anything strange.

But as I look around, scenting the air, there's nothing off – and nothing fresh. No signs of anyone here now, or anyone around in the past few hours. When I'm sure, I look up at my brother, who peers through the entrance above me. Then I beckon with my hand.

Come, my gesture implies. It's clear. Or, it is at least for now.

Roger drops into the sewer with me and then we prowl forward, our hands free and our hackles raised. The wolf within me is on high alert, a growl already rumbling in his chest, his eyes sharp, his teeth sharper. As we move forward, I hear my men start to enter the sewer as well, tiny splashes letting me know as each one arrives.

We decided on a team of sixteen, with Roger and I at the head of it. Enough troops to arrive as a force, but not so large that we could truly lose track of them. Each of our men carries a weapon – some guns, some close- combat tools like knives and tasers. Roger and I, however, carry only ourselves. Our wolves are more powerful than anything we're likely to meet. We're each weapon enough.

Slowly, we move forward, the map of the sewer that I've memorized aligning perfectly with the reality. We turn to the left when we come to a junction, and I hold up a fist in the

air, asking my team to stop. This, I know, is where the test really begins. Because the priest's lair is just up ahead.

Slowly, I turn to survey our forces and count twelve men behind us, which is good. Two, I know, are standing outside at the entrance as guards.

Slowly, so everyone can see, I move my hand to my shoulder and flip the switch on the radio that's there attached to the strap of my bullet-proof vest with velcro. Everyone else does the same, ensuring that we'll be able to stay in touch if anyone is separated.

As I turn back towards our target, I think that it's not so important if we're quiet anymore – Because there's no going back now.

I signal my forces to move forward now, walking more quickly now, my boots splashing through the water as I head directly for the door that I know is 100 feet forward and to the left. Roger snarls beside me, a wicked sound, as we approach –

50 feet now, and we're almost running -25, and it's a charge –

I roar as we turn the corner towards the lair, ready to rip to shreds anyone that I find inside – But as I turn towards the door, ready to throw it open, I find that it's already ajar dangling off its hinges. My heart pounds with unused adrenaline as I survey the scene before me and realize –

“Shit,” Roger snaps, storming into the empty room and looking around. “We're too fucking late.” Another growl is my only reply as I signal my troops to stop the charge and set up a perimeter around the door, which they quickly do. Then, I step inside with my brother, looking around.

The room is not spotless – there are still scraps of paper around, beat up tables and chairs that the priest was clearly using to set up his potions or whatever it was he was doing down here.

“God damn it,” Roger curses, pounding a fist against the wall.

“It's not totally lost,” I say, turning around and surveying the room. “There are some things here that could be useful...”

“Dominic,” Roger says, exasperated, and I turn to see him rolling his eyes at me. “He took everything that could tell us anything.”

“No, brother,” I say, my mouth curling into a grin as I lift my nose and scent the air. “He left us one thing...”

And then, intrigued, Roger lifts his nose as well and takes a moment to detect it as well. "You're right," he says, bringing his eyes back to mine with a flash of pleasure.

"We have a scent," I growl, and then I look at him curiously. "What do you think?" I ask. "Is it...likely that he would have stuck around?"

"He had a lot of stuff, Dominic," Roger replies, considering. "If he wanted to keep it all, needed it close, is it possible that he didn't go far?"

Perhaps...another part of the sewer, hoping that we'll assume it's a lost cause?"

"It's worth following it up," I say, grinning a little at the idea that the case is still on. "Would you like to take the honor? Or should I?"

"Oh please," Roger growls, his voice low and eager. "Let me."

I nod and, with a flash, Roger transforms into his wolf, shaking his fur loose as soon as he does as if he's been eager to do this for hours, to become the animal that's been prowling within him, eager to protect his family, his mate, his new baby.

I step back and watch Roger work as he moves slowly around the room, sniffing everything, his intensified senses picking up more of the priest's scent than our human bodies are capable of doing. Then, when he's ready, Roger lifts his eyes to mine and nods his snout once.

"All right," I say, gesturing towards the door. "Lead the way."

Eagerly, Roger prowls out, his gigantic wolf so tall that his shoulders nearly coming even with my chest. Our troops move aside to make room for Roger as he turns into the sewer, looking left down the long aisle. I signal my troops for their attention, which they give me eagerly, and then point down the hall after Roger's retreating form, signaling that we will follow.

As one, the troops nod, and we start off with Roger in the lead and me close behind.

Chapter 347 – Underground

Sinclair

I give our troops outside of the sewer updates on our movements, letting them know when we take left and right turns, all the time following Roger, who steadily pads along, tracing the priest's scent. The troops outside relay the information back to my father, in the bunker, who is able to trace our movement on the maps so that he, at least, knows precisely where we are at all times.

About half an hour later, Roger looks over his shoulder at me, his eyes suddenly fierce and I nod, understanding his message. We're close very close now.

I raise a hand above my shoulder, making the signal that tells my troops to be on alert, ready for action. Behind me, I can almost feel their bodies tensing, becoming ready to react.

As a group, we continue to prowl through the sewers, making as little noise as we can. Roger turns a corner and I am just on his tail, looking around, when suddenly I see light again – bright golden light, a significant contrast to the grey mossy sewer around us. We pause for a moment and listen, hearing – god, what is that?

Some kind of clanging rings from an open door on the left almost exactly like the one we just left. Roger was right the priest needed to set up shop – again. A clanging comes from inside the room, hitting an unnatural pitch that hurts my ears – I see Roger visibly wince and move toward him, but suddenly quite suddenly –

A figure emerges from the room – And, as one, Roger and I act.

Roger is in the air almost instantly, a snarl ripping from his throat as he leaps for the priest. I shout a command for our troops to surround, to contain

The priest's face is shocked, stunned as he spins towards us, as Roger's body collides with his, Roger's paws slamming into his shoulders and knocking the priest hard to the floor, holding him down in the slushy grey water –

I'm moving towards them, a shout on my lips, seeking to get behind the Priest to block the obvious direction of his exit should he seek to run – and as I move past him I see the moment his face changes from surprise and fear to fury, to menace, to a gleeful kind of hate.

I successfully block his exit, my own body tensed for any action, as Roger lowers his snarling face to the priest's, warning him with body if not with words to stay still-

But the priest bares his own teeth and angles his hand up, pointed towards Roger's

chest, and then he says some archaic word –

And there is a blast of light, of heat, of fire that blinds me, makes me turn my head away for a split second before I hear a yelp of fear and pain. And as I snap my face back towards the priest I see Roger soaring upwards through the air, his back and shoulders slamming into the low sewer ceiling before gravity pulls him back down –

But the priest is fast –

Before Roger's body can fall back down on top of him the priest has twisted to the side and turns, predictably, towards me – away from the troops he can see ranging in the direction from which we came.

The priest freezes when he sees me there, waiting for him, a slow and terrible grin spreading across my face as I focus my attention on him, resisting the horrible temptation to look towards my brother, who I can see struggling to find his feet behind the priest –

“Let's try this again,” I growl as I focus on the priest's face, recognizing him instantly as the man we captured before – the one who was in my house during the attack on my child –

The priest feints left but doesn't fool me – I'm bigger than he is, far bigger, and have no reason to shift my position before he tries to get past me, which he does next. But as the priest goes right, seeking to slip by me and make a run for it, I grab his left arm and twist it up behind his back as I grab his right shoulder, working to incapacitate him.

It works, for a moment – before the priest growls another one of those arcane words and I feel a pulse of burning heat coming from his left hand, his wrist suddenly becoming white hot- way too hot for me to hold, lest my skin begin to melt

I roar at the pain and the frustration but hold on long enough to spin him around, pushing him hard towards the door emitting the yellow light instead of the long corridor – if we can get him in there, we can trap him –

The priest yells as he stumbles a few steps and then stops himself by grabbing the door frame. He sends a frantic glance over his shoulder towards us and then throws himself into the room, reaching for something-

“MOVE!” I roar to my troops, who have been waiting, tense, for precisely that order. And they do – quickly, my men spread out around the door, ready to trap him in. As they get in order, as I watch the first two of my troops enter the room to attempt to incapacitate the Priest, I also turn to Rodger, desperate to assess his condition.

As I turn to him, though, I see that he's already standing by my side, growling at the door, likewise assessing the situation in a flash. I reach out towards him, sniffing, smelling something strange, and as I lay my hand on his fur he looks up at me and I see that under his chin – his chest – his belly as well, likely – his skin is a mess of seared flesh.

"Christ, Roger," I breathe, starting to bend to look at him, but he snaps his teeth at me – clearly communicating to leave it, that he's all right.

"Okay," I say, making the quick decision to allow him to decide his limits for himself. "Just go easy, all ri-

But before I can finish my sentence, screams erupt from inside the room and Roger and I barrel forward, our bodies instantly alert.

When we get inside we see that almost all of our troops are pressing the priest back against the far wall where he hurls spell after spell at them – some landing against the bodies of my men, some spells dying in the air

But where they do land – My eyes go wide as I see the magic slicing, burning, ripping, tearing –

And then, on more instinct than anything else, I roar and transform into my wolf as I throw myself across the room, heading directly for him. My eyes shift to my wolf vision in an instant and focus on the priest's face just as he sees me coming, just as his eyes go wide-

And he opens his mouth, taking a deep breath, winding back his arm to throw something at me something big-

But I'm faster than him, faster than he thought I was. And my body slams into his just as the start of the spell falls from his lips – searing my skin but not cutting me down –

His head hits the wall, hard, and he groans, collapsing to the ground beneath me. In another flash I transform back into my body, whipping a knife from my side and pressing it tight against his throat.

"Submit," I growl, glaring down at him. But he just grins – grins up at me through his pain – and I notice, too late, his hand clenching in a sack of powder that spilled conveniently open at his side.

"Not a chance in hell," he snarls, "the master will have his boy!"

And then he whips his hand up – scattering the dust and saying a single word that lights

the entire room on fire. I scream in pain, but my voice is barely audible –

I feel my body and my mind crushed under the screams of all of my men, and my brother, crying out along with me.

Chapter 348 – Triage

Ella

“It’s been too long,” I mutter, twisting my fingers together with my eyes fixed on the hard iron door of the bunker. I have one hand on Rafe’s little carrier as he sleeps peacefully beside the two uncomfortable chairs that Cora and I dragged down the hall, wanting to be as close to the entrance as possible so that we get news as soon as it comes.

“Ella,” Cora seethes through her teeth. “You have got to stop saying that. You’re making me freak out.”

“It’s not me that’s making you flip out,” I retort, angry. “It’s our idiot mates, who insisted on leaving here four hours ago and haven’t called once to let us know that they’re all right -”

But then, as if my words are magic, the door bangs open and Cora and I instantly leap up from our seats.

I gasp, almost breaking into tears when I see that the first figure through the door is my mate. I hurl myself towards Sinclair, intent on wrapping him in my arms, but I come to a skidding stop as I realize that he’s carrying one of his men, unconscious and bloody and

“Oh my god,” I gasp, my hands flying to my mouth as I stop and actually look at my mate. I notice the burns that have ripped through his clothes, leaving red welts across his exposed skin

Notice the horrible burned flesh of the man in his arms –

Sinclair’s eyes linger on me for half a longing second before moving sharply to my sister. “Cora,” he gasps, “help – it’s bad -”

She rushes to him in a moment, assessing the soldier, but Sinclair jerks him away, shaking his head. “No, Cora,” he insists, making her look up at him. “We need – we need space them-” all of

I gasp again, horrified now as I understand what my mate means, as I see my sister’s face go pale. But she snaps immediately into her professional demeanor, looking to me.

“Ella?” she snaps. “You’re my nurse now, all right?”

“Y-yes,” I hurry to agree, eager to help and reaching down to grab Rafe’s carrier and sling it over my right arm.

“Your largest room,” she demands, turning her attention back to Sinclair. Then she turns,

pointing down the hall. “Go, now.”

As Sinclair begins to move, more of the men begin to stumble through the door. The hall is immediately filled with the sound of pain – moans, and groans, cries –

But to her credit, Cora doesn’t look back, storming forward, ready to get things prepared. I can’t help myself from turning towards the injured men who stumble through the door, my attention immediately going to the red-haired young man the one who spoke in the meeting, who noticed that my attackers didn’t shift as he falls hard against the wall, gasping.

I move to him immediately, working to sling his arm around my shoulder, taking as much of his weight as I can. Lean on me,” I demand, beginning to move forward as I feel his body shift hard against mine. It’s heavy,

struggling under his weight, trying to also balance Rafe’s carrier against my other arm, hoping to hell that he doesn’t collapse against me and squish the baby when we both fall –

But we make it – following the men who can walk by themselves through the door into what looks more like a

barracks than the small private bedroom that Sinclair and I have to ourselves. I look around swiftly and see my mate settling the man who cannot walk into a single bed and, seeing other men taking seats on bed and chairs around the room, I move the young man on my shoulder to the closest bed, holding steady while he takes his weight off of me and collapses there.

“Are you all right?” I ask, leaning over him, worried

“I’ll be fine,” he groans, waving a hand at me. “It hurts but it’s nothing bad – thank you, Luna,” he murmurs, leaning his head back against the pillow and squeezing his eyes tight in pain.

I nod to him, making a mental note to come check again soon, but I can’t help myself from moving swiftly away, holding my baby’s carrier in two hands now as I hurry over to my mate who is standing now, talking briskly to Cora.

“Are you all right?” I gasp, unable to stop myself from pressing myself up against him and raising a hand to touch his scorched cheek.

“I’m fine, Ella,” Sinclair assures me, turning his intense gaze to me for one long, lingering second, clearly relishing the sight of me before he turns his eyes to Rafe, who cries a little in his carrier. Sinclair lingers, looking at his son, for just for a moment before looking

over to the door. "I'm sorry," he says, rushed, "I have to go help -"

"Of course," I say, touching Sinclair lightly on the arm and urging him forward.

But, quick, urgent, Cora stops Sinclair by grabbing his hand. He turns to her, torn, wanting to go and help his men but –

"Roger," she breathes, her eyes worried.

"He's fine," Sinclair replies, brisk, looking steadily into her eyes for a split second. "He's out helping some of the worst hurt get out of the cars -"

"Okay," Cora says, her voice shaking as she exhales a deep breath and stands for a moment with her eyes closed, collecting herself. "Okay."

And then, the moment passed, Cora's eyes fly open again and she's all business. She nods her chin towards the door, urging Sinclair forward, and he moves quickly away. Then she turns to me. "I need you to start moving clockwise around the room," she says, a calm efficiency setting over her. "You call out to me if anyone looks like they need me desperately – otherwise, you ask each man his name and what's wrong. Take notes," she says, looking around and then grabbing a pen and pad of paper off a little bookshelf.

"Okay," I exhale, and as I take the writing materials from her I realize that my hands are shaking.

"Hold it together, sis," Cora says quietly, stepping close to me for a moment and taking my face in her hands, looking at me steadily. "You've got this. All right?"

I nod to her, anxious, and then we both move at once, her left and me right, to begin to help.

Time passes in a flash as I move from man to man, asking each what they need, getting it for them if it's in my power but otherwise writing down what each man says before moving to the next. The only thing that interrupts my attention is Cora's brief cry – just once as Roger comes into the room. He, too, is carrying a soldier who cannot walk and Cora is at his side in a second.

There's a brief moment, after Roger gets the man to a bed, where Cora kisses him, pressing her body flush against his, but then it's done –

My sister is the doctor again, ready to care, to help –

And I'm so grateful for her in that moment that I can barely breathe. And as I look at Roger's face as he takes a second to watch her, I know that he feels precisely the same.

As I turn to the next man in my rotation, I feel a little hope swell in me, so glad that Roger and Cora found each other. Because the four of us, as a team? We can do this. I have so much faith that we can.

Chapter 349 – Aftermath

Cora

It's hours, hours later when I finally have a moment to step back and breathe. And when I do, I feel my head spin and stumble back a step or two. Roger is there, instantly, his hand on my back.

"Cora," he says, pulling me closer to him, tilting up my face so that he can study me. "Are you all right? You're – "

"I'm fine," I mutter, frustrated, trying to push away and get back to work. I have a moment to breathe, but honestly there's so much more that – needs to be done for these men –

"No," Roger says, stubborn. "You're pushing yourself too far – you're pregnant, Cora -"

"Roger," I sigh, turning to glare at him in earnest now and putting a hand on his chest. "This cannot be the refrain that I hear for the next nine – or six or however many months, all right? I am not going to stop doing my job-stop healing people – just because I'm pregnant."

I hear Roger begin to growl in protest but I lock my teeth together, staring up at him, hard. And, slowly, I see him start to relent, to remember the person who he chose as his mate.

"This is my life, Roger," I whisper, " my identity. I'm a doctor – I made an oath! I'm going to help them."

"All right," he replies, taking a step back. "But Cora, please -"

"I know," I say, nodding and starting to look around the room. "I'll be careful – I'll stop before I'm totally exhausted. I won't put myself or the baby at risk."

"And how close are you to exhaustion now?" he asks, looking me over from top to bottom, his eyes pausing on my stomach.

I take a moment to pause, closing my eyes and checking in with myself. Honestly, I'm not far off – but there's still so much that these men need. Honestly the extent of the burns that they came in with some of them down to the bone – I cringe to even think of it.

"Can I..." I hear Roger ask, and then when I look up at him again I feel him place his hand against my stomach.

"Okay," I breathe, nodding a little as I agree to stay still so he can check in on the baby.

Roger closes his eyes and concentrates and I'm a little sorry as I see that it's hard for him. I remember the way that Sinclair communicated with Rafe while Ella was pregnant it seemed...simpler.

Roger has much more connection with the baby when he's touching me and when he concentrates, but...I do wish it was easier for him. I want him to have the full fatherhood experience, with all of its blessings. And it breaks my heart that my body – my humanness has taken a little of that away from him.

"Baby's okay," Roger murmurs, opening his eyes and leaning forward to press his lips against my forehead. "Just...let's not push, all right?"

"Okay," I agree, nodding. And then I turn to him fully, peering at some of the red skin on his face. "How is your healing going?"

"Slow," he murmurs, his voice not much more than a growl. "Much slower than usual. Like whatever that priest did to hurt us like this had its own curse attached."

I nod, listening, and then turn my attention to Roger's forearms, which were the worst blistered. Slowly, I unwrap the bandage on one and he hisses at the pain of it. I get a brief glimpse of the skin below before I wrap him back up. "You're healing," I say, looking up at him, "but yes, the pace is ...worse than what I would have hoped for a werewolf. Especially one of your abilities."

"It will be all right," he sighs, I think being brave for me. As Roger puts a sweet, concerned hand on the side of my face, Ella comes over. "Cora," she whispers, glancing around the room. "What can I do?"

I turn to her, my poor tired sister, and open my arms out, inviting her in for a hug which she happily accepts. "How is Sinclair?" I ask, looking to the corner of the room where her mate naps lightly, Rafe secure in his arms even as he sleeps. Sinclair's burns were worse than Rogers, but likewise superficial compared to some that their men faced. Only the two men who waited outside of the sewer came out unscathed.

"I think he's all right," Ella replies when she pulls away from me. "More his pride hurt than anything, and he's frustrated," she says, giving a chagrined little smile to Roger. "I know you guys are disappointed that the priest got away."

"Such a missed opportunity," Roger murmurs, shaking his head. "And he burned all of his supplies on his way out, along with us, so we don't have much information from the misadventure either." He sighs, full of regret.

"Your dad seems to be optimistic about the interviews," I point out, nodding towards where Henry is rolling between the beds, speaking kindly to any of the men who are

conscious and willing to report what they heard and saw. "He's sure you'll get something good out of it."

"Not enough to compensate our losses," Roger murmurs, looking around. "We are so... so lucky that everyone came out alive."

Alive, I think, but certainly not unscathed. Roger and Sinclair, I suspect, came out of the situation relatively unharmed because of their genetics. As with the size of their wolves, their access to some of the other wolf powers – increased sense of smell, quick reflexes, the ability to heal – are likewise amplified. I wonder if, really, that ability to heal is what saved them their bodies burned out their magic working to protect their skin and, because they have what can best be described as more magic, they came out with minor burns while some of the others...

I go a little pale as I look around and realize, again, that some of these men will bear these scars for life, and at least three will require major reconstructive surgery. As soon as possible.

And, as much as Roger won't want to hear it...there's really only one person who is best going to be able to perform those surgeries. I'm still wondering how best to bring this up when Ella produces the perfect lead-in for me.

"Cora," she says, wiping a hand across her brow. "Are you all right? Are you tired?" I fight my instinct to point out that Ella, as a nursing mother, has just as much at stake in her exhaustion as me, but instead I take up the thread.

"I can keep going for a little bit," I say, holding her gaze. She has been such a good, stalwart little nurse today honestly, I think she missed a bit of her calling in not going into that field. "But I'm not going to be able to keep going all night. And some of these men they're going to need extended care."

Ella bites her lip and nods, understanding, glancing between me and Roger. "What should we do?" she turns to Sinclair. "Should we wake him? Ask him if he has ideas?"

"No," I say, reaching out to take Ella's hand as she impulsively begins to move towards her mate. "Honestly, Ella," I say, and then I turn to Roger, because my words are actually addressed to him. "We need...more help. We need more hands."

Roger instantly sees the direction that my thoughts are heading in and his eyes go dark, narrowing at me. "No way in hell," he snaps, starting to shake his head. "Roger," I plead, moving close to him. "Don't make this about jealousy – we need him – "

"Need who?" Ella asks, confused.

“Hank,” I say, turning towards her and sighing. “We need Hank.”

Chapter 350 – New Plans

Coral

Roger gives a rough, sarcastic little laugh. “Jealousy? Jealousy? Cora, this has nothing to do with jealousy-

“Then what is it?” I ask, confused.” Honestly, Roger – if it’s not jealousy, then what else is your reason for not wanting Hank here to take over for me, and treat these men when I need to rest?” And Roger goes still, at a loss for words, because...

Ella starts to laugh suddenly, and then slaps a hand over her mouth. Roger growls and glares at her, but she just shakes her head in apology, still unable to help it.

“He’s not jealous,” I say to Ella defensively, choosing allegiance over truth and working hard to keep a smile off my face as I stand close to my man and slip an arm around his waist. Because I’m little pleased, honestly, to see Roger want me all to himself, to be protective enough that he doesn’t want Hank anywhere near me. “He’s just...” and I hesitate, smiling up at Roger, shaking my head because I don’t know what to say.

“What I am is done with the two of you,” Roger growls, peeling his arm from around my waist and glaring at the two of us. “Sisters,” he scoffs, and then points a finger between us. “I’ll stay up treating these men all damn night myself, if that’s what it takes,” he continues. “But no Hank in the bunker. Are we clear?”

“Yes, baby,” I murmur, moving close to him again and laughing a little as I wrap my arms around him again.” Whatever you say.”

“Damn right, whatever I say,” Roger mutters, his feathers still a little ruffled. And then, after a minute, he whispers to me again. “We’ll send them out,” he says, “as soon as Sinclair wakes up. The ones you want to have further treatment? I won’t stop them from getting it, just because I...don’t want him here.”

“Okay,” I whisper, resting my head against my mate’s chest and smiling softly. “That’s a good plan.”

Ella

We worked for hours more, to the point where I think that Cora was falling asleep on her feet. But I couldn’t leave her didn’t want to let the entire burden of healing all of the men who went on the mission on her shoulders.

We did send three out – Sinclair contacted Hank and arranged for the worst hurt to be transferred to the hospital once Cora got them stable enough to go, but there was still an incredible amount of work to do after that changing bandages, checking vitals, ensuring

that everyone was fed and had water. We're lucky, really, that Sinclair foresaw this as a possibility and had the bunker stocked and ready with a great deal of medical supplies.

Eventually, it was Roger and Sinclair who told us to stop. I was leaning over a sleeping patient, trying to see if he was healing, when suddenly I felt a warm hand on my hip. I didn't jump – either because I had no more energy for it or because I knew who it was. I don't know which.

"Enough, Ella," came Sinclair's rumbling voice, and I turned to look up into his face, and then peer down at our baby curled against his chest. Rafe was awake, blinking at me with his sweet eyes.

"Hey baby," I murmured, reaching for my boy, and my mate passed Rafe to me easily before guiding me towards the door of the room. "But – " I said, looking over my shoulder for Cora – not wanting to leave her – but I saw Roger having a small conversation with her, his hands on her shoulders, convincing her, too, that it's time for bed.

"It's all right," I heard a voice call, and I turned, surprised, to see Henry at the door. "I'll stay up."

"But you've been up all day," I murmured as Sinclair and I crossed to him.

"I'm an old man, Ella," Henry said, smiling up at me and quirking his fingers so that I understood that he wanted like me to bend down so that he can see the baby. As I obliged him, Henry continued. "What time I have

left in this world, I'd like to spend awake anyway. I don't want to miss anything." He brushed Rafe's cheek softly before smiling at me again. "Go to sleep – I'll wake you if anything happens and we need you."

"All right," I said, standing up straight and heaving a huge yawn. We started to pass through the door but Henry called after us. "Sleep well," he said, "but in the morning...we have to talk."

I hesitate, wanting to go back, wanting to ask why, but Sinclair put a firm hand on my shoulder. "Talk tomorrow," he says, exhausted. "Tonight? Sleep."

And I put my head on my poor wounded mate's shoulder and let him lead me away to our room. Now, in the cold light of morning, I wake before Sinclair and take a moment to look him over while he's sleeping. The burns on his body were restricted mostly to the skin that wasn't covered by clothing, and I quickly look over his face, arms, and hands, pleased to see that while there are some tender pink spots, the skin shiny and taut, he looks much better than he did yesterday.

I heave a sigh of relief and swing my feet off the bed to turn to Rafe, who is just beginning to fuss in his makeshift crib.

“Hello, little boy,” I murmur, bending over his cradle. I lift Rafe up into my arms, joy blooming in me as I consider him. He really is a good baby – he still wakes up in the night when he needs me, of course, but in the mornings he has this remarkable tendency of waking up just moments after I do. ” Are you using your little wolf senses?” I whisper to him, carrying him over to the bed and adjusting my shirt a little so that I can feed him, “are you giving mommy a break?”

He doesn't reply, of course, but as I sit down I feel Sinclair move his hand over a little to rest against my thigh, letting me know that he's awake, but not yet up. I smile at him, pleased and understanding, letting him have his minute of silence, and then I feed my baby, savoring the slow start to the morning.

Because, I know, it is going to be a very busy day. And, considering Henry's warning the night before, one in which we are going to get some news that we really don't like.

The peace of the morning doesn't last long. As I'm still feeding Rafe a knock comes at the door and, groaning, Sinclair gets up to answer it. A few hurried words there has him closing the door and crossing the room to our small bathroom, seeking a shower.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Fine for now,” he says, “but Hank sent some reports from the hospital regarding how our men made it through the night.”

“Are they okay?” I ask in a whisper, anxious.

“They're stable,” Sinclair responds as he ducks into the bathroom, but I can tell by the tightness of his voice that it's not all as good as it could be. And suddenly my heart plummets for him as I realize how difficult it must be, ordering men to go into situations where they put their lives on the line. I sigh and finish up with the baby, grabbing a burp cloth to toss over my shoulder before I lift Rafe to my chest and begin to pat him on the back while I move to the bathroom door to peer in after my mate.

I can't help the little thrill that runs through me when I see Sinclair in the little glass and metal shower, the water running over his powerful, naked form. I know that it's inappropriate to be turned on by my mate at this moment but...well, I can't help it.

He turns, perhaps intuiting something – or maybe smelling my desire on the air- and smirks at me while he quickly runs the bar of soap over his body.

“You like what you see?” he asks.

"A little too much," I respond, precisely at the same moment that Rafe gives a little burp and spits up on my shoulder. We both laugh at his timing. But then I turn my eyes seriously back to Sinclair. "You'll tell me?" I ask, my voice soft. "How I can help you?"

And my mate meets my eyes seriously as he says, "I will. Thank you, Ella. For being so selfless. For always wanting to hello."

I smile a little and give him a wink. "It's not completely selfless," I reply with a little shrug as I turn away. "I was promised six more babies, after all. Gotta keep you happy until I get the last one, and then I'll be done with you."

"Six!?" he calls after me as I saunter away, making me laugh. "I thought we agreed on four!"

"Now it's eight!" I shout back, laying Rafe on his little changing table and starting to get him ready for the day, listening to Sinclair's groan from the other room.

"Daddy doesn't mean it," I whisper to the baby as I begin to change his diaper. "If your siblings are all as cute as you, we'll have twelve."

Rafe coos and chuckles as we hear Sinclair's shout from the bathroom.

"I heard that!"

Chapter 351 – Keeping it in the Family

Ella

I'm the last one to the conference room – baby stuff but when I come through the door I'm very surprised to see that it's just family gathering today.

"Where is everyone?" I ask, holding Rafe close to my chest so that he peers over my shoulder. He's a very curious baby – he likes to look around, even though he can't see much yet. I move over to the table where Cora, Roger, Henry, and Sinclair sit, all clearly waiting for me, all with faces which are ...drawn. Concerned. And turned on me.

"What," I breathe, freezing before I can sit down. "What's wrong? What is it?" "Sit, Ella," Henry says, waving to the open chair between him and Sinclair.

"No," I say, shaking my head, the word falling out of my mouth before I can even think. "No way this looks... this looks like bad news.'

And some part of me knows that I'm being ridiculous – that it won't be good news miraculously if I don't hear it but still. Fear stripes through me – I really, really can't handle more bad news now, not after the few days we've had. And not if it, apparently, all focuses on me.

"Ella, please," Sinclair says, looking at me with gentle eyes and pulling the empty chair out. "I promise it's not as bad as you think."

"Do you all know?" I ask, going rigid.

"Henry told us before you came in," Cora replies, leaning forward towards me across the table, Roger's hand on her back. "He just wanted us to be prepared, so that the focus could be on you when we told you.'

"Oh my god," I whisper, slowly moving to the chair and sitting down." Is it me?" I ask. "Did I did I do something?"

"Not at all," Henry says, shaking his head at me. "I'm sorry, Ella – – I may have gone about this in the wrong way. I didn't mean to frighten you. I just – it was convenient that you were last, so I told them first so that the focus could be on you now, as I believe that this news will affect you most."

"And where " I ask, looking around again for the members of the team who went on the mission yesterday. Some of them, I know, would be well enough to attend now, if they were wanted. " Where are the other researchers?" I ask, knowing that Henry has been working all day and night with his own team.

“This is...” Henry continues, hesitating, “a family matter, Ella. Those who don’t know will be briefed soon. But I wanted to talk about this together, with the main parties involved.” Henry’s eyes drift, now, to Rafe in my arms, and I go tense.

“Okay,” I say, drawing my lips together in a thin line. “Let’s get on with it then. What’s wrong?”

Henry looks towards Rafe now, nodding to him, apparently giving him permission to talk in some kind of pre-arranged pattern. This, contrary to what they wanted, somehow makes me more nervous, that they’ve rehearsed how to tell me this news.

Is this some kind of intervention or something? What did I do? Feeling my tension, the baby starts to fuss, and Sinclair takes him from me tucking Rafe into the crook of one elbow before draping his other arm warmly over my shoulders. I feel at once calmer, and start to wonder – ridiculously if Sinclair isn’t just the baby whisperer, but the Ella whisperer as well.

“Ella,” Roger starts, and I turn my entire focus to him. “Yesterday, when we were fighting the priest, he said something...strange.”

I don’t say anything, just clench my teeth and stare at him, willing him to continue Fast.

“We had him pinned – he only got to whatever...I don’t know, whatever magical powder allowed him to really fire bomb us, by accident, and when he realized that he was going to be able to use it – I think he slipped.”

“Slipped?” I ask, confused. “Like on ice?”

“No,” Roger replies, sighing a little at his inability to be clear. “I mean, slipped on his words. Messed up. Because he said: ‘the master will have his boy.’”

“The master will have his boy,” I repeat, glancing down at Rafe sitting contentedly curled in the crook of Sinclair’s arm. He’s gotten a hand free of his swaddle and is clenching it and opening it, apparently fascinated by the movement of his fingers. “Do you are we assuming that the boy is Rafe?”

“We are,” Henry confirms, drawing my eyes towards him.

“But the master,” I say – and as I talk, I know I should just shut up and listen, but I can’t help myself. “Did he mean – did the priest mean the God of Darkness?”

“That’s where it gets complicated,” Henry says carefully, speaking slowly and calmly and watching my face to make sure I’m following along. I’m grateful for it because even though I’m not stupid, I’m panicked enough now that my mind feels like it’s in three

different places at once.

“You see,” Henry continues, “I had my team working all night trying to parse this phrase, trying to figure it out. And we’ve done a great deal of research, so far, on this Monastic Cult of the God of Darkness. And never, in any of our materials both from centuries ago and today – have we ever seen any of the priests or acolytes ever refer to the God himself as ‘master.’ Instead, he is always God, Father, Dark Majesty things like that.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyes going wide. I understand but I mean, I don’t get it. Not yet. Not in the same way that the rest of them do, apparently, judging by the worried looks on their faces as I look around the table. “What what does that mean?”

“It means,” Sinclair says, picking up the thread, and I turn my head to look sharply up at him. “That...there is someone else ordering all of this to happen. That they haven’t done this merely to serve their god, or at his orders but that, instead, there seems – to be someone else, a mortal to whom they are responding.”

“What?” I breathe, and then I groan, closing my eyes and leaning my head back. It was so much simpler when I thought it was just a situation like that between the Goddess and my birth mother Reina, just a person-to-diety contract that really involved the two of them the God and his priests. But now finding out that there’s someone else involved, who a powerful priest is calling master? Someone who is directing all of this fighting, who planned the insemination?

My family gives me a moment to process this and they’re all waiting for me when I sigh and open my eyes, looking around at them again. “Well?” I ask. “Do we know who it is?”

“We have...a lead,” Henry says quietly, and I turn my attention back to him. I keep my mouth shut now, though, exhausted by this already – just wanting to hear the news. “I’ve had some of our more clever men working through the dark web, trying to find any trace of the members of the modern cult. And while they were unable to trace precisely who was doing the talking, they were able to discover a sort of...hub. For the communications. A location to and from which a great number of the messages were being transported.”

“Oh?” I ask, encouraged. “Where?”

“It went to...” Henry hesitates here, taking a deep breath, as if he doesn’t know how to say it.

“Just tell her, dad,” Sinclair snaps, his voice irritated, probably because he can feel my tension coming to its breaking point down the bond.

“It is difficult for me,” Henry says, irritated himself now and shooting his son a little glare.

“As I am not...

detached from this development.” But he shifts his eyes to me, then. “Ella,” he continues, “the team did a great deal of reconnaissance on this location and I have to admit that I was shocked when they told me what they discovered. That the man living in the residence... I had long assumed that he was dead. Or at least, so separate from the world of influence and politics that he may as well have been. It is my fault,” he sighs, hanging his head, “for overlooking him.”

“Who?” I breathe, my whole body locked with tension, my breath coming short. “Who lives there?”

“His name is Xander,” Henry tells me, his voice grim. “He was...a Duke, when his brother – your father, Xavier – was King on the throne.”

Chapter 352 – Duke

Ella

“D-duke?” I stutter out, completely overwhelmed by the information, my eyes going wide. “There are dukes? And I had I have an uncle!?”

“I’m sorry,” Henry says, and I can see the guilt written all over his face. “I overlooked this – honestly, no one has heard from him in years – and, considering what we think he was actually getting up to, it makes a great deal of sense that he wanted everyone to believe that.”

“Who,” I say, frantic now, looking between Henry, and Sinclair, and Roger – Cora, I see, looking at me with worried eyes, but I know she doesn’t have any answers – “who is he?”

“Relax, Ella,” Sinclair murmurs to me, leaning close. “It’s all right -”

“It is absolutely not all right -” I snap, not wanting to be mean but completely panicked right now. “My father is dead but I have an uncle? Seriously? And no one told me?”

Henry continues to hang his head, shaking a little, and I instantly feel guilty. It’s not his fault – it’s so complicated, the politics, and why would he tell me about an uncle if he hadn’t spoken to the man in 30 years had genuinely assumed he was dead –

“I’m sorry, Henry,” I say quickly, leaning forward to put a hand on his arm. “I’m so sorry – I’m behaving so poorly – ”

“No, Ella,” Henry says, moving his attention back up to me. “Your reaction is absolutely correct. I have failed you in this.” His eyes shift to Sinclair now. And you, son.”

“We have to stop this,” Sinclair says, shaking his head. “Honestly, the blame game does no one any good. No one blames you, dad and Ella, you don’t have anything to apologize for. We all know this is a lot. So, can we please?” he says, pausing now to look around the table. “Can we continue? There is... more...”

I groan a little and give Henry’s arm a little squeeze to let him know I don’t blame him for any of it, and that I love him dearly and am grateful for him every day. At least, I hope he gets all that from a squeeze, but the little smile he sends me suggests that he understood at least part of that. And I feel instant relief.

“Xander was your father’s older brother, Ella,” Sinclair informs me briskly, I think a little irritated at the disruption and wanting all of the information on the table now so that we can decide to do something, instead of just talking about it. I smile at him a little, loving my all-action Alpha mate who is ready to go even though he almost got burned to a crisp

yesterday.

“He was much older,” Henry says, “and there were always...rumors about whether or not his father was his biological father. Either way, Xander was recognized, but he was never the favored son. That is why Xavier – stronger, faster, smarter, better-liked – took the throne instead of Xander.”

“A stance which I actually think is quite clever,” Roger quips, and I’m shocked to find a smile on my mouth as he delicately raises his brows, looking up at the ceiling. “I mean, some of us think that the better-looking brother should always take the throne – ”

And while Sinclair growls and Cora elbows Roger not-too-gently in the stomach to get him to stop, I grin at my brother-in-law, grateful for the laugh which has drained some of my tension away. He gives me a little wink in response.

“Anyway,” Sinclair continues, glaring at his brother, “Xander was never a popular figure in politics – he was always fringe, always very much the King’s sullen brother rather than a real player. When Xavier died, Xander...he wasn’t even considered for the throne. No one said his name, not even him, as a potential heir.”

“Which,” Henry adds, “was perhaps... the mistake. That started all of this.”

“Started what?” I ask, confused again.

“Ella,” Henry says, taking my hand. “Nothing is for sure. But our best guess, at this point, is that...well, that Xander put this in motion. That he knew he was never a contender for the throne when his brother died but he coveted it anyway 1 that Xander wanted it, perhaps his whole life, and certainly after his brother died, but when no one mentioned him as a potential heir he started to devise a new plan to get what he wanted.”

“A longer plan,” I whisper, sitting back against my chair. “To – to reclaim the throne. To keep it...in his family’s line.”

And my eyes drift back to Rafe now, cooing gently in his father’s arms. My baby, the grandson of a King. The nephew of a Duke that, perhaps, always wanted to be in charge.

“It makes sense,” Roger says softly. “Honestly, it makes so much sense that we were fools not to consider it before now. Who benefits from Rafe being born? The man who intends to kidnap him and put him on the throne as a puppet, acting as regent for eighteen years before Rafe is old enough to rule himself.”

“I don’t think we’re fools to have overlooked Xander,” Sinclair rumbles beside me. “I

haven't heard Xander's name since I was a child – I, too, thought he died in quiet obscurity. He's taken great pains, I think, to ensure that everyone assumed that he did. He is playing the long game – we're not total idiots for falling into the traps he's taken twenty years to lay. We're simply outplayed."

"So," I interrupt, still wanting more details. "Can you – I mean -" I exhale quickly, closing my eyes and gathering my thoughts, "is the assumption that we're making here that Xander wanted Rafe to be born so that he would be a legitimate heir to Xavier's throne? Is that it?"

"Yes," Sinclair says, confirming what I've pieced together. "We know that Reina told Xavier about you on his deathbed he must have found a way, somehow, to communicate your existence to his brother before, or directly after, his death – I don't know. A note, a letter perhaps."

"So why didn't he come for me?" I ask, brisk. "To be the heir?"

Sinclair and Roger hesitate, looking at each other. "Well," Sinclair says carefully, "your mother did a very good job hiding you at the orphanage, which actually emphasizes the story. She could have had you raised by a well-known human family, but she chose an orphanage to disguise you."

"But no," I say, looking at Cora. "They knew they knew we were there. Yes? The dark priests – if they were the ones who are looking to Xander for some reason as their master – they knew that Cora and I were in the orphanage. They followed us our whole lives! So..."

I draw my brows together, trying to figure it out. If Xander wanted an heir... why didn't he just come to get me?

"Ella," Sinclair says, tightening his arm around my shoulders. "Xavier and Xander they were deeply old-school Alphas. They come from a world where ." he hesitates again, looking down at the floor. My eyes flash as I figure out what he's not saying.

"Seriously?" I breathe. "Seriously, my uncle my blood family – left me in the orphanage because I was a girl? Because he didn't see me as a legitimate heir to the throne?"

Sinclair looks up at me with sad eyes. "That's our best guess for Ella," he now, says softly, shaking his head slowly at me. "That he contracted the priests – or perhaps was always aligned with them, and called to them to watch over you. But that he had no real interest in you as a person. Merely in..." he hesitates, his eyes drifting to my stomach.

"Oh," I say, my heart sinking – though I don't know why. I just – just can't imagine someone being so callous to a child, especially their niece... "I was always just...a

broodmare to him..." I murmur, looking over at my baby.

"Rafe, a male heir, was always the goal," Sinclair agrees. "We think Xander bided his time, and then – when all of his pieces were in place – he ...arranged it all."

"But why," I ask, suddenly confused. "Why did he pick you as the father?"

Chapter 353 – A Prince of Two Thrones

Ella

“Um, excuse me,” Roger says, and Sinclair and I – mutually surprised snap our attention to him. “Obviously,” he says, pointing a slow hand between the air between him and his brother, “the question of why the Sinclair blood was desired is the only one with the clear answer – ”

“Oh my god, Roger,” Sinclair murmurs, leaning back in his chair and raising a hand to cover his face, exhausted.

“The quality of these genetics,” Roger continues, grinning, “I mean, who wouldn’t want these babies -”

“Not me, anymore,” Cora quips, folding her arms over her chest and smirking at Roger with a raised brow. “Baby for sale! Highest bidder!”

“You’re worth millions,” Roger whispers towards Cora’s stomach, leaning his head low to pretend to speak to the baby. “Don’t let them undersell you -”

“Enough,” Sinclair snaps, though he does it half-heartedly. I can’t help but laugh a little, and honestly, when I consider it, I can’t disagree. I look at the proof still curled up in Sinclair’s arms.

“We did make a stone-cold cutie,” I say, leaning over to run a fond finger down my baby’s belly. “If mean Uncle Xandy was going for good looks, he certainly picked the right stud.”

Sinclair pulls his hand away from his face and shakes his head a little at me, as if he can’t believe that I, too, am making jokes at this time. But I smile up at him and shrug one shoulder. If we can’t laugh, what the hell are we doing in this life? And then I send a little pulse of love down the bond, letting Sinclair know that I appreciate him and am taking it seriously.

I just also need...well, a little bit of lightness, sometimes, to balance all of the horrible things that have happened on the way to bringing our wonderful baby into the world. Sinclair nods, understanding, and sends me his own pulse of love right back.

“Our best guess,” Henry says, softly bringing this conversation back on track, “is that Xander...he never meant for Dominic to ever know that you were pregnant, Ella. It was by chance that Dominic was in the clinic that day – that he sensed the child in you. A wonderful mistake for us, considering the result, but very bad luck for him.”

“God,” I breathe, looking over at my mate and my baby. “I can’t imagine...if I had just

gone through this thinking I was a human, giving birth to a twelve- pound baby before six months had passed...and then, so soon after that, someone coming to steal him away..."

"I would have found you," Sinclair promises me, reaching out to brush his knuckles against my cheek. "There's no way I wouldn't have. This was meant to be. The Goddess had her hand in it as well."

"I know," I say, believing him. "But... if that was Xander's plan..."

"Yes," he agrees. "It would have been ...awful."

"But really," Cora says, sitting forward. "Beyond the desire for genetically blessed, gorgeous kids," she says, smirking at her mate, "what is the rationale for choosing a powerful werewolf like Sinclair?" she asks. "I mean, why not any other wolf? Why not," she hesitates, looking to the man at her side, "well, why not Roger? Same genetic package..."

"I think," Henry says, interrupting Roger, who opens his mouth to say something smart but closes it when his father sends a little look his way, "that Xander was working towards a dual claim to the throne. That Xander was betting that Dominic would beat Damon and take the throne next, and that if Xander were able to kidnap and raise a child who had not only Xavier's blood, but Dominic's as well..."

"It would be very hard to contest," I finish, fascinated by the depths to which my uncle had – apparently – thought this through. "A child of two thrones, uniting them..."

"Indeed," Henry agrees, nodding his head a little. He then looks at Sinclair, a little apologetic. "I wouldn't be surprised, Dominic, if he even had a hand in your inability to have children with Lydia. I don't know quite how he would have managed that, but clearly you are capable of fathering children..." he shrugs, sighing a little at the mystery of it. "It would have fallen quite neatly into his plans for you to take the throne without any biological heirs of your own."

"God," I say, slumping back in my chair, shaking my head in wonder. "He really thought of everything, didn't he?"

Around the table my family nods in confirmation, but Henry holds out a hesitant hand. "It is important," he says, moving his gaze to each of us in turn, "that we all realize that this is a theoretical explanation. We only have a very little bit of evidence that Xander is himself involved. And while I admit that the story that we can spin out from these details is compelling..."

"It's just a story," I finish for him, nodding, understanding. I look around. "Do you think

we'll be able to get more evidence for it?"

"We'll try," Sinclair says with a little shrug. "Especially now that we know where Xander is located, we can refocus our attacks from his priests to him, under the theory that he is, indeed, the master that the priest spoke of."

My stomach twists a little at this. "I imagine," I say softly, "that the master would be...well guarded."

"Yes," Roger confirms, steadily holding my gaze. "We need to be better prepared. But unfortunately, we also need to move fast."

"Why?" I ask, suddenly tense. The last thing I want – in all of the world – is for Roger and Sinclair to go darting out of the bunker again, getting themselves killed.

"Not immediately, Ella," Sinclair says, working hard to put me at ease. We have a few days. But in order to find this information..." he shifts his eyes to his father now, letting him take over.

"In order to find traces of information on the dark web, Ella," Henry explains, "one must, unfortunately, leave their own traces. We were careful, our tracks were faint but," he shrugs, "there is every possibility that Xander could himself discover that we know where he is. And that he may be involved. And if he does..." Henry shrugs.

"We lose any advantage," Sinclair finishes. "He could disappear, and regroup elsewhere."

I sigh, turning my head and focusing on my child, letting Rafe center me and root me to the world. He, after all, is the most important thing here, in my whole life. "All right," I say softly, reaching out a hand to softly brush my son's dark hair. "Please, just tell me how I can help."

"We can't do anything," Cora says, her voice firm, "until we get your men back into shape. And that will take a few days. Ella," she says, and I turn to her, surprised. "I could use your help. You were a wonderful nurse yesterday. And Hank will be sending our soldiers back at some point – we'll need to be able to continue their care here."

"Of course," I say, agreeing without thinking. If Cora needs me by her side, then that's where I'll be. She nods firmly at me and I smile, glad that I can be of assistance.

"Good," Henry says, nodding and pressing his hands together, forming a triangle with his fingers. "While you're doing that, we will come up with a plan regarding our next steps."

I nod, starting to stand up, getting ready to move on when Henry puts out a hand to stop

me. Confused, I settle back into my chair, looking towards him.

“Before we break up,” Henry says quietly, “there is one last issue which we must discuss.”

We're all silent before Cora, unable to help it, breaks the silence. “What is it?” she asks, worried and confused. Henry turns his gaze sternly, but not without apology, to her. “We have to discuss the problem...that is Dr. Hank.”

Chapter 354 – The Problem

Ella

Cora blinks rapidly in disbelief and my own mouth falls open. I see Roger go tense in his chair and feel Sinclair do the same beside me.

“Wha- what?” Cora asks, aghast, leaning forward to stare more closely at Henry. “The problem that is HankJ; FJA

Hank? What the hell kind of problem is Hank?”

I grimace a little when I see her get defensive and dart my eyes to Roger, seeing him rankle at it, just a little bit. Roger, I know, is jealous of Hank – not very jealous, not in a bad way. Just...as much as he doesn't blame Cora for her previous hesitations, or hold them against her...

...well, he's not going to be thrilled about Cora's ex's continued presence in our lives, is he? Especially when he sees Cora defend Hank like that..

“Please, Cora,” Henry says, putting a peaceful hand out towards her. “Just... hear me out.”

“What is wrong with Hank,” she insists, continuing to be angry, which just upsets Roger more. I glance at Sinclair, worried. His face is a mirror of my own.

“Please” Henry says again, leaning forward and staring at Cora only at Cora intensely. “I mean no insult. I just want to...discuss.”

Slowly, not giving in yet, Cora leans back against her chair and crosses her arms over her chest again, not happy about it but willing to listen.

“I am just concerned,” Henry continues, “about this man's continued connection to this family.”

“Damn straight,” Roger mutters, his face turned down towards the table. Cora shoots Roger a dirty look he pretends he doesn't see.

“Why?” I ask, confused. “He's he's our doctor – he did such a good job caring for Rafe -”

“Yes,” Henry says, turning to me and holding my eyes. “He did a very good job taking care of Rafe. He was at your beck and call. He was very conveniently available when you were hurt after the temple and worked incredibly hard to keep you and Rafe alive beyond the point when other doctors would have given up.”

Henry stops there, staring at me, letting me figure it out. “No,” Cora says, breaking in and shaking her head vehemently. “Henry, you’re wrong-”

“Oh my god,” I whisper, a frightened hand going to my mouth. “Do you seriously think...”

“This is ridiculous!” Cora cries, but Henry speaks as if he didn’t hear her.

“We know that the Cult is incredibly good at infiltrating lives,” Henry says to me and to Sinclair. “We also know that they tend to place their people in high-powered positions – lawyers, bankers, doctors. We also know that Xander, if he is behind this, is very content to play the long game.”

“Christ,” Sinclair mutters, and I turn to see him again covering his face with his hand. “How did we not see this coming-”

“Because it didn’t happen!” Cora cries, standing up now. “Hank is not part of this – he – he’s my colleague! We work together!”

“At a clinic that we built, Cora,” Roger points out, clearly working hard to keep his temper even. “At a clinic that we pay for. This man is...very suddenly very involved in our lives. Dad has a good point

“You’re all ridiculous,” Cora growls, shaking her head around at all of us.” Hank is a good person who has only done wonderful things for this family. I know him. I know that he only has good things in his heart, and wants to help, and to bring wolf and human culture together.” She pauses, furious, glaring around at all of us. “And now you all owe him an apology for doubting him for a single second.”

I nod, understanding, and feeling sorry because Cora has a point. Henry does too we need to be careful, especially because we know that the Cult has a history of deploying sleeper agents. But Hank himself? He hasn’t given us a single reason to doubt him.

But Henry, Sinclair, and Roger don’t nod along with me. Instead, they just quietly look away from Cora, not saying the words that echo in the back of my mind as well.

That Cora...she might just not want to believe bad things about Hank because she got so close to him. That if he tricked all of us, then he tricked her the most. And that would be a horrible thing to realize.

“You’re all ridiculous,” Cora growls, and when I look up at her I see that she intuits what we’re all thinking. Without another word Cora seals her mouth shut and strides from the room, slamming the door shut behind her. Roger gets to his feet to follow but I hold up a hand.

“Let her go,” I advise, sighing. “Just... let her cool off. It’s...harder for her to hear than for us. All right?”

“Why does she even care,” he growls, and I can almost feel the jealousy radiating from him.

“He’s her ex, Roger,” I say softly, “but ...they didn’t have a bad breakup like I did with Mike. If anything, she’s the bad guy in this situation who cheated on him and got knocked up.” I slowly shake my head at my brother-in-law as I watch his jaw drop when he considers the situation from Hank’s side. “Cora doesn’t hate him,” I say softly. “And you can’t ask her to.”

I see Roger clench his jaw as he processes my words, and then turns away from us with a sigh, raising both hands to twist his fingers frustratedly in his hair.

“I’ll handle it,” Sinclair says softly to me, gently offering Rafe to me so that he can stand and go to his brother. I take the baby and watch my mate slowly walk over to Roger to say a few words, or talk it through, or just be there with him while Roger processes his emotions. And I’m suddenly very glad, again, for my steady mate who cares so deeply for those he loves.

“Are you all right, Ella?” Henry asks softly beside me.

“I am,” I say, turning to him and heaving a big sigh. “I...it was a lot of news, wasn’t it?” I ask and Henry raises his eyebrows as he nods, communicating that he thinks that’s a bit of an understatement. “But I’ll get through it,” I say, sure of it. “We all will, because we have each other.”

“That’s the spirit,” Henry says, reaching out to pat my hand. And then he leans forward further to look at little Rafe. “See the trouble you’ve caused, grandson?” he says to the baby, teasing him. Rafe lets out a little squeal that sounds like a protest, making us both laugh.

“He’s no trouble,” I coo, smiling at my baby and wrinkling my nose at him as well. “That’s everyone else’s job. Rafe is just here to be our perfect little prince,” I sigh.

“Truer words,” Henry says softly, shaking his head a little as he watches his grandchild. “A prince he is. And some day, a king.”

“Goddess willing,” I murmur, shaking my head at the idea. Rafe’s future – on days like this, it feels so far away, like there are so many obstacles ahead of him. But I steel myself, knowing that it’s my job to work through those for him.

Because my little boy deserves the world, and I will give it to him. And anyone who stands in my way had better watch the hell out.

Chapter 355 – Gone too Far

Ella

I find Cora, a little later, in the long room that we've turned into a hospital, working hard probably to distract herself. I grimace, a little, when I see that her bedside manner has certainly suffered in the wake of her frustration she's snapping at patients, glaring at them when they take too long to answer, and stalking from bed to bed. As I come into the room the men look towards me with desperate eyes.

I hold up my free hand – Rafe bundled in my other arm – to the men, letting them know that I'll handle it, and then I walk calmly over to my sister's side.

"Hey Cora," I say casually, looking down at the clipboard in her hand on which she's writing in her messy doctor's scrawl. Cora doesn't respond, just glares at me and turns her attention back to the clipboard.

I scoff a little at her and bump my shoulder against hers, a little pissed off now. "Why don't we try that again, Cora," I say, through my teeth a little. "Hello, Cora. How are you?"

"I'm not speaking to you, Ella," Cora snaps, shaking her head and continuing to write. "Or my stupid mate, or yours. Or their dad."

"What about Rafe," I ask, adjusting the baby so that she can see him more clearly.

Cora flicks her eyes to Rafe, who looks up at her with his big sweet eyes, and she hesitates a little. "Rafe is fine," she mutters, "he did not betray me. Unlike the rest of you."

"Plus he's cute," I say, grinning down at him. But Cora scoffs and turns away, angry that I am ignoring her point: that we betrayed her by accusing Hank.

"Cora!" I sigh, calling after her and then hurrying to keep up. "Listen, I'm sorry I really am! You know I like Hank I like him a lot! I was very team Hank for a minute there, and I was the only one! But we have to be vigilant about this, and you know that Henry had some good points!"

She whirls on me then. "You think that he could seriously fool me, Ella?" she asks, folding her arms across her chest, holding the clipboard close against her. "Do you seriously think I have such a bad taste in men that I would honestly sleep with someone who was trying to kidnap my nephew?"

Out of the corner of my eye I see the wounded man in the bed closest to use flinch, his eyes going wide with awkward surprise. But I do my best to ignore him and keep this

between me and my sister.

“No, Cora,” I say, reaching out and putting a hand on her arm to assure her but also to keep her from running away from me again. “Seriously I don’t think that Hank did anything! I just think that Henry has a point – that we need to double-check everything before we trust people! I mean, they wouldn’t even let me call you when we first got the anonymous note that someone was going to try to take Rafe!

They’re just being vigilant!” Cora scowls, looking away from me but clearly seeing my point. “Well, that was bullshit too,” she murmurs.

“Which I told them!” I say, taking my hand away and beginning to bounce Rafe a little bit, who is getting agitated now, probably because of my frustration. “But they checked anyway! Honestly, Cora,” I say, taking a deep breath and trying to bring all of our energy back down to a reasonable level, “what’s the harm in letting them be careful, in letting them check? Hank is going to come out of it clean. So, what does it hurt?”

“It hurts me, Ella,” Cora says quietly, looking into my face for the first time. “I already hurt Hank – and he did nothing wrong. And now he has people hurling these accusations at him, which he totally doesn’t deserve! He’s my colleague, and my friend – and a good person! And I’m vouching for him, and nobody believes me!”

I step closer to my sister now, my heart hurting to see her feeling this way, to hear her voice get all squeaky with emotion.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to her, putting my arm around my sister and pulling her close. “I’m sorry, Cora. I won’t doubt you again. Okay? Forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she sighs, giving me a squeeze and then pulling away as she wipes at her eyes. “You’re just – just trying to protect your baby.” And I see her unconsciously move the clipboard lower on her body, her hand moving to her stomach.

“That’s right,” I say, turning my head to look down at the baby. “He’s been very troublesome since he’s been born. Look what you’ve done now, baby!” I joke, trying to bring a little levity to the situation. “Your simple existence has inspired a war that has resulted in accusations that have hurt your auntie’s feelings! You apologize, now!” And then I hold Rafe up towards Cora, as if he could actually utter a formal apology.

Rafe, suddenly surprised at the change in his position, lets out a little squeak of surprise, which makes Cora laugh. She shakes her head, smiling now, and reaches for the baby, taking him from my hands. “Nooo, not my nephew,” she says, cradling him against her arm and smiling down at him. “Don’t listen to her, Rafe, it’s not your fault.”

And I grin as my baby wrinkles his little face and sighs, honestly as if a grave injustice

has been done to him, and we both laugh again.

“Okay,” Cora says, sighing and looking up at me. “Thanks, Ella,” she whispers. “I think... I think you snapped me out of it a bit.”

“Good,” I say, reaching to take the baby back. “Roger will be glad to hear it. And so will all of your poor patients.” “What?” she asks, and then she looks around the room to see that all of them are staring at us and have been listening to every word we said. “Oh my god,” she mutters, putting her head in her hand and laughing.

“It’s okay,” I say, grinning and putting a hand on her back. “Now that they’re fairly sure you won’t murder them for taking too long reporting their symptoms, I think we’ll make good progress!”

Cora gives me a little glare but she moves on from it, lifting the clipboard again and looking over its contents. “I have so much to do,” she murmurs, flipping through some of the papers. They need a lot of care -”

“Can I help?” I ask, eager to pitch in. Cora looks up at me and blinks. “You want to play nurse again?”

“Sure!” I say, a little excited. “Just give me a minute to give Rafe to Sinclair, all right? Then you will have my full attention.”

Cora smiles at me then and nods. “It would be a big help, Ella,” she replies. “If you can spare the time.”

“For you, sister?” I say, giving her a wink as I turn away. “I’ll make the time.”

Chapter 356 – Long Days

Ella

Cora wasn't kidding when she said that there was a lot to do for the wounded men. Honestly, I underestimated her – or she's a much faster and better worker for me, because I fall into bed at the end of each day totally wiped, asleep before Sinclair can even say goodnight to me.

The boys are busy too and I feel a little sorry for Cora and Roger, honestly. They should be living in a newly-mated newly-pregnant love bubble right now, and instead she's spending all day healing while he's trapped in a boardroom with his brother and his father, trying to figure out how to defeat my estranged uncle.

"How can you feel sorry for them," Sinclair says to me when I take a break to feed Rafe. He comes to spend these little stolen moments with me, knowing that they're some of the only moments I'll be able to sit and concentrate on something else for a few minutes. "It's not like you and I got to enjoy any kind of love bubble."

"Yes we did," I say, frowning at him. " Dominic, we had so much sex in those first few months when we discovered I was pregnant -"

"Sure," he says, a little sarcastic as he draws his brows together. "Between me accusing you of stealing my sperm, and then the constant attacks, and then having to flee the country – yeah, totally had a peaceful little love bubble somewhere in there."

I laugh as I consider it, shaking my head and looking down at my sweet hungry baby. "I don't know," I say, giving a little shrug. "It was all wonderful to me. But maybe I just forget all the horrible parts as some side effect of pregnancy – like how mothers have to forget the pain of birth, or else they'd never do it again."

Sinclair moves closer to me, putting an arm around me to let me and Rafe lean close against his broad, muscled chest. "Or," he murmurs, "it could be that the pleasure was just so good that it completely overshadowed the pain

"Oh yes," I murmur back, smirking a little. "Clearly, Dominic, the sex is so good that I barely remember my nearly -fatal injuries

He laughs now, shaking his head, and we both shrug it off, knowing that it doesn't matter. That we wouldn't trade any of what we went through for something different. Because it's worth it all of it is worth it.

And I keep that idea in my heart as I spend hour after hour trailing behind Cora, tending to the poor men who were willing to sacrifice their health in the effort to save my little boy. The hours feel endless – changing bandages, administering medicine, checking in

with the men to see how they're recovering –

Honestly, I'm shocked by it, a little bit – especially the idea that Cora deemed three men too far beyond her ability to care for and sent them away. Because, honestly, some of these men seem to be doing pretty poorly – it baffles me to consider that there are some who were even worse.

“Should we send some of these men to Hank, Cora?” I ask late one afternoon, wiping the sweat from my brow. “Can we – can we really handle this?”

“We should keep them here, Ella,” Cora says quietly, “unless they need critical care. Hank – and all the other hospitals – they're totally overwhelmed as it is with the aftermath of the war. These men- they're on the mend, if not slowly. And Roger and Sinclair brought in enough medicine to keep us going. I know it looks bad but,” she sighs, looking around the room at all the men we're helping. “They'll get through it.”

“Should it be taking this long?” I whisper, concerned. “Roger and Sinclair...”

She nods, biting her lip, understanding me. “I don't know. I'm used to our mates' fast healing too but Ella, they're both pretty remarkable, powerful specimens.”

“I heal fast too, though,” I murmur.

“Yah,” she says, rolling her eyes at me a little. “Probably the goddess blood in you,” “Your blood too,” I murmur, poking her in the shoulder.

She nods, letting it pass, but she does look over the men with some concern. It does seem to be taking longer than I'd expect it to as well...” she sighs, looking down at her battered clipboard as if it holds the answers. “Maybe there was something in the spell designed to inhibit the healing...”

“If only we all had a little bit of the goddess blood,” I murmur, looking around. “It seems unfair.” Cora looks up suddenly and blinks, turning to me.

“What?” I ask, turning to her as well.

“Actually,” she says, cocking her head a bit. “Well, can you, Ella?”

“Huh?” I ask again, totally confused.

“It goes back to something Hank said once,” Cora says, suddenly excited. “On the night when he came over to my -” she hesitates for a moment, place – and blushes a little, and I suddenly know precisely the night she means. I grin at her and she swats a hand at me, moving on.

“Seriously – he asked me if I thought that you might want to go into the medical field. So that you could, maybe, use our mom’s gift to heal people – ”

“Oh,” I say, my eyebrows raising in surprise. And then I look down at myself, a little ridiculously, as if I could see the gift floating around in my chest or something. Then I frown, wondering.

“Do you think you could do it?” Cora asks, excited and a little breathless. “I don’t know,” I say, snapping my head up to look at her. “I mean, I’ve only used it to heal myself. Do you think it can go...outward?”

“Well, we know it can go outward- you gave it to me, and then I used it to to do whatever I did. I don’t know. communicate to everyone.”

“Yeah,” I say, frowning a little, “but was that a healing?” Cora just shrugs, staring at me, and then we both laugh because we both feel a little stupid trying to figure this out.

“Honestly,” I murmur, “mom could have given us like, a little instructions pamphlet, couldn’t she?”

“Not her style,” Cora sighs, shaking her head. “But Ella...what do you think? Does it feel like you could?”

“I don’t know,” I wonder, my hands pressing to my chest where I can feel the constant, steady, warm glow of it – so familiar that I frequently forget it’s there. “But maybe we should try?”

“Okay!” Cora says, excited, and then she starts flipping through her paperwork, trying to think through which of the injured men might be the best candidate to get to work on. But as Cora begins to narrow down our selection, I feel my wolf nudge me a little with her nose, trying to get my attention.

What? I ask, curious, but feeling a little of her anxiety and suspicion start to bleed through into my own feelings. What’s wrong?

Not right, not right, she says, narrowing her eyes a little and turning in a tight circle around the gift, protective and wary. Why is that man asking questions about our gift? It’s our gift. It’s not his gift. He can’t have it.

I blink in surprise at the thought, but suddenly I’m wondering it myself. What was Hank doing asking Cora questions about my gift when they were on a date?

Was he just being a good medical health professional and identifying an incredible

power that could be harnessed for the good of many, instead of being hogged by me?

Or was he asking for...other reasons? And is my wolf only suspicious now because Henry put the idea in our heads that we should be wary of Hank? Or is the act of asking suspicious in itself?

Cora whips her head up then, grinning at me with excitement as she points towards one of the men across the room. "This one is perfect," she breathes, and then hurries off towards his bed, signaling me to follow.

I hurry after her, eager to help – and suddenly a wave of guilt runs through me. Didn't I just promise Cora that I'd trust her instincts about Hank?

But still, my little wolf continues to prowl, and I honestly don't know where this suspicion comes from. Is it just me being paranoid, and turning that paranoia on a good man?

Or is Hank asking weird questions to the woman he knew was least likely to suspect him of getting up to anything strange?

Chapter 357 – Healing

Ella

I push my suspicions aside as I come to Cora's side as she explains to Conner – the bright, red-haired young man who noticed that the men who attacked me didn't transform into their wolves – our plan.

"Sure," he says, blinking up at both of us when Cora asks if he'd be willing to let me try to heal him with the Goddess power. "Um," he says next, hesitating a little, "does it hurt?"

"Um," I reply, rubbing an anxious hand up and down my arm, "I don't think so? But then again, I've only tried it on myself?" I look over at Cora to see if she has any ideas, but she just shrugs.

"Consider it a very experimental treatment," Cora says, turning back to Conner. "But I think Ella is right – it never seemed to hurt her before, when she used it. Or that one time I used it. But if it works!" she gives him a big smile now, "I think you will be a very happy little guinea pig!"

"Guinea pig?" he asks, confused. "Will I is this going to transform me into a guinea pig?"

"No," I say, laughing and sitting down on the edge of his bed, reaching for his arm, which he pulls away from me in sudden anxiety. "Seriously!" I say, laughing still. "That's just a common phrase – you don't know it? Maybe it's a human phrase. For like, a creature who gets experimented on first."

"Oh," Conner says, relaxing a little but still looking at us warily. But then he nods, letting us know that he's on board. "Just a lot of strange...magic, I guess, these days. Magic that I don't think we've had a lot of exposure to before."

"You're telling me," Cora murmurs, checking some final details as she runs a hand over her stomach, which is hosting what we can best describe as the first human-wolf hybrid pup ever conceived.

Conner doesn't get it, but I do, and I give her a bright grin, which she returns. "Okay!" she says. "Conner, can we try it on the burn on your arm?" she asks, pointing to the gauze on his right forearm. "I think that's a minor enough wound that it could be a good place to experiment."

"Okay," he says, moving to unwrap it. I lean eagerly forward, but regret it immediately when he pulls the gauze away, wincing as he reveals an angry, wet red wound. I sit back again, grimacing at it, reminded again of why I didn't become a nurse. But then I steel myself and sit closer, looking up at Cora. "How do I start?"

She just shrugs at me, as lost as I am. "I don't know, Ella," she says, waving a vague hand at me. "Do your... meditation thing. Access the gift. Or whatever."

"Okay," I agree with a little shrug. And then because it feels strange not to be doing anything to engage with the wound, I reach out and hover my hands over Conner's arm as I close my eyes.

It's easier to fall into the state than it has been before – maybe because I'm not wounded, or growing a child, or stressed in any real way. This time, the relaxation comes almost immediately and I find myself sinking quite deeply into that space where the light behind my eyes turns a light lavender.

"You've got it, Ella," Cora whispers next to me, and I can tell that she's excited but working hard not to distract me too much. "You're glowing. Now, do you feel like you can direct it?"

I take another deep breath and, when I exhale, I begin to seek for pain. I feel the gift move then, as it's done before – it sweeps through me first, seeking to heal anything, but when it doesn't find anything it...pulses a little, curious, almost wondering why I've called on it.

And so I give it a little push, asking it to look...further than me. To go outside. And it feels, a very little bit, like the time that I passed it to Cora – though it's hard to compare, because I had been so weak at that time.

But now, when I'm strong, I feel like I have so much more control – like I don't have to shove the entire gift into someone's hands before I collapse under the weight of it. But instead, like I can just take a piece of it, and move it forward to where –

To where I can begin to feel a very real pain in front of me, radiating up towards my hands. And so I give it a little nudge, and push the gift towards it, and I feel it flowing from my hands.

Next to me, I hear Cora gasp, and Conner inhale sharply, but I do my very best to not let myself be drawn away, to continue with my steady little push until I feel...

Until I feel the pain beneath my hands cool, and ebb, and steady. Until I can't feel it at all. And then I pull my hands back, and lay them in my lap, and take a few deep breaths as I allow the lavender light to fade behind my eyes. And then I open my eyes and look around.

And Cora and Conner are staring at me, their jaws wide open. "Did it work?" I breathe, curious. And neither say a word, so I dart my eyes downward at Conner's arm-

And my own mouth falls open.

His wound it's...

It's gone. I blink, shocked, and lean forward, grabbing his arm – which makes poor Conner jump – so that I can bring it closer to my eyes. And as I study it I realize that the wound is not gone it's just...fixed. The skin has closed over what was a few moments before a pussy, bloody burn. And it's not as if the magic has unmade the wound and returned the arm to its former state –

It really, honestly looks as if it just healed it. On Conner's arm is a new patch of flesh, still tender and pink and hairless, without any of the freckles that cover the rest of his arm.

"Oh my god," I breathe, staring at it, and then up at Cora, and then over at Conner.

And when I see the bright smile on his face, the tears in his eyes, I burst into joyful laughter myself, hardly able to believe it. And then Cora lets out a shriek of joy and throws herself on top of me in a crazy hug, knocking me back against the bed and poor Conner's legs as she, too, laughs with joy.

"It's a miracle!" she shouts, so excited she stumbles over the words. "It's incredible! Ella! Think of what you could do!"

"I know!" I yell, giddy with excitement for it and hugging my sister close to me. Then men in the room are all turned towards us now, even those at the far side of the room who probably had no idea what we were trying –

And, as they figure it out- that they could start feeling better so soon if I'm able to keep doing this smiles spread across their own faces.

"Are you okay?" I ask Conner when Cora lets me sit up straighter, our arms still wrapped excitedly around each other. "Did it hurt – does it hurt?"

"It's fine," he says, holding his arm up in front of his face and marveling at it. "It didn't hurt at all – I mean, it was tingly – and a little cold – but it's amazing – it's totally fixed!"

"Ahh!" I yell, excited, and I squeeze Cora closer in my excitement.

"Thank you," Conner breathes, and my heart squeezes when I see tears start to streak down his face. "Thank you so much, Luna," he says, shaking his head. at me in wonder.

"I'm so glad," I say, reaching out and squeezing his hand. "So glad, Conner."

And I bite my lip and smile at him, and he smiles back, and then suddenly I'm jumping to my feet almost spilling 1 Cora to the floor –

“What!” Cora shouts, laughing. “Ella, what are you -”

“I'm going to tell Sinclair!” I shout, dashing towards the door. “I'll be back!” I call over my shoulder to her, to all of them. “I'll be right back!”

And I can barely contain my excitement as I sprint down the hall towards the conference room, where I know the boys are working hard, trying to come up with a plan.

Chapter 358 – Careful, Trouble

Sinclair

Everyone's head snaps up and towards the door as we hear the footsteps pounding down the hall towards the closed door of the conference room. I can feel the aggression fill the air – almost smell it, even as all around me hackles raise and teeth are bared at the sudden noise at what sounds like an assailant –

Next to me, Roger begins to raise from his seat, his eyes fixed on the door, ready to attack whatever comes through –

But instantly I grab his collar, shoving him back down into his seat. “Down!” I order, my voice ringing out with Alpha command, and heads instantly turn to me, obedient but confused-

But I just shake my head a little bit, my eyes fixed on the door. Because I know those footsteps, know their cadence. Only Ella would barrel heedlessly towards a room of wary male wolves who can't see or smell their attacker –

But I barely have time to heave half a sigh before she bursts through the door, shouting “Dominic!”

Everyone in the room jumps to the feet, but I'm already halfway across the room to her, grabbing her out of the air as she leaps up at me, catching her in my arms and turning to snarl at my men, warning them to contain themselves –

But Ella, true to form, doesn't even notice the fact that she scared the hell out of all of us that she almost got herself torn to ribbons –

Instead, she barrels heedlessly forth in her excitement. “Dominic!” she says again, laughing, grabbing my face in her hands and turning it towards her. “It's a miracle! I did it! You have to come and see! I'm going to do it again! I'm going to fix them all!”

“Ella,” I growl, patting down my own Alpha instincts and trying, simultaneously, to listen to her and look towards my men to ensure that no one is doing anything stupid in their panic –

“Come on!” she says, wiggling wildly in her struggle to get out of my arms. You have to come and see! Bring the baby! We'll show him too!”

“What?” I ask, turning my attention back to her once I've assessed that my men are not on the edge of an attack, despite her heedless burst into the room. “What are you talking about?”

“Put me down!” she orders, laughing and still struggling in my arms. I blink, trying to process what’s happening, but I obey, putting her back down on her feet. She instantly dashes away to where Rafe is sleeping in his carrier on the floor, grabbing it by the handle and then running back to me, snatching up my hand and working to pull me along with her.

“Come on!” she calls again, her glee and energy infectious despite the fact that she hadn’t even looked around the room to see if she’s disturbed us, let alone figured out how much –

I glance at Roger and my dad to see them laughing a little and shaking their heads, and then I sigh and let Ella pull me from the room, figuring that the risk is gone and she is clearly not going to let whatever this is rest until she tells me what she’s discovered-

“Ella,” I say as she pulls me out of the room, leaning back a little to put my weight in my heels to slow her. “Where are we going what happened?”

“I did it!” she says, looking over her shoulder at me gleefully and pulling harder at my hand. “You have to come and see! It’s amazing!”

“Ella!” I say again, harsher now, stopping completely but not letting go of her hand so that she’s obliged, against her will, to turn back and frown at me. “Slow down for a second! Just explain! Please!”

And, seeing my real confusion, Ella shakes her head, laughs again, and then turns fully to me to explain. “Cora had an idea!” she says. “Actually, Hank did! But that’s not important!”

I frown, suddenly, at the mention of his name. But she barrels onward and I let her. “I used my mother’s gift and I healed someone, Dominic!” she says, beaming up at me. “It was so easy! I just ...accessed the gift! And nudged it towards his wound! And he’s fixed! And I can do it again, and again, and I can fix all of them!”

My mouth drops open as I listen and I figure out what she’s saying. “What?” I gasp, my eyes going wide. “Are you are you serious, Ella?” I ask, looking sharply down the hall towards the little makeshift medical center we set up. If she’s serious – if she can use the Goddess’ gift to heal the men – it could change everything –

“Yes!” she says, laughing again and coming close to me, pressing herself against me and looking up warmly into my face. “I did it!”

“Miracle,” I murmur, shaking my head as I look down at her, marveling at my little mate. “You’re a miracle, trouble.”

"I know," she says, wrinkling her nose at me and then laughing. But suddenly she's moving again, tugging me down the hall. "Come on! I want you to see it!"

The next few minutes are as amazing as she suggested that they would be. Some of what Ella does is familiar – I've seen her access the gift before, after all, and heal herself. But seeing the glow spread from her body to another's? Seeing a terrible, disfiguring wound knit itself together before my eyes in mere moments?

I'm breathless with amazement by the time she opens her eyes again and grins at me.

"See?" she whispers up at me. "Isn't it cool?" I stare at her a little, amazed again by her powers of understatement, but all I can do is shake my head in wonder.

"The possibilities," Cora says, eagerly flipping through her papers and looking around at the men to decide who should be next. "They're

remarkable – I mean, clearly you can do this with fresh wounds, Ella, but can you do it with disease? Could you seek and destroy cancerous cells? Could you

Ella gasps with excitement and anticipation at the possibilities, jumping up to talk more with her sister, but I go pale when I consider the extent of this.

Because if Ella's access to her mother's gift makes her able to heal not only wounds, but other things as well? And people find out about it?

I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes at all of the people who I know, already, would see her as a valuable target.

While my sweet, generous mate can only see this newly-discovered power for the possibilities it offers to bring life and happiness to suffering people....

I know that the world is filled with people far worse than she. Who will see to take her, and keep her, and use her for their own ends.

And as I consider this consider how I'd rip them all to shreds – my eyes drift to my baby boy, still sleeping in his carrier despite the racket his mother is making. I can't help but smirk a little at him, realizing that he has perhaps already learned to simply cope with some of his mother's extremes rather than objecting to them.

But beyond that joy my child gives me, beyond the love I feel for him, the worry of what his life holds twists in me. Because the Goddess's blood runs through his veins as well. What if he has access to this kind of power? To even half of it?

If he does, people are going to come for him too. They've already started – but more will come. And I will protect them both until the end of me – but will it be enough?

Chapter 359 – Necessary Rest

Ella

I heal for hours that afternoon, long into the night. I stop and take breaks of course for dinner, to feed and spend a little time with Rafe, to consult with Cora about our next steps – but then I'm back to it. Talking to the men to see what hurts worst, accessing the gift, holding out my hands to fix them.

It's incredible how much I get done, how much healing I perform as the day passes. By the time Sinclair puts his hands on my shoulders, proud but stern, I feel as if half of the room of terribly wounded men has been healed completely and the others are well on their way.

"Enough, trouble," Sinclair murmurs to me and I gasp and twist to look up at him. "What?" I ask, confused. "But there's so much more "

"Enough," he says, shaking his head at me. "It's ten o'clock – "

"What?" I gasp, truly surprised. I had no idea that the time had passed so quickly. I honestly thought it was earlier –

"Please," he says softly, low enough so that only I can hear. "Stop now, Ella. They'll all survive the night. They'll make it till morning, when you can start again."

I stop, trying to listen to him, but as I look around the room I feel so guilty. How can I let these men to go sleep in pain? How can I possibly curl up in my own bed, comfortable with my mate and my baby, knowing they won't be able to sleep because they got hurt trying to protect my son? When if I just pushed a little further I could heal them –

"That's it," Sinclair snaps, perhaps sensing my guilt and anxiety, and before I can protest further he scoops me up in his arms, shaking his head down at me.

"Dominic!" I protest, frowning up at him. "Put me down! I'm not even tired yet! I can-

"Ella," he says, his voice still stern, you have done enough for one day. And you don't know what toll this gift takes on your body or if it takes a toll on = itself. Does it need to regenerate? Do you need to sleep for three days to build back your strength?"

I hesitate now, realizing that he has a point. We have no idea how this works, if there will be a cost to me. Honestly, considering that, I'm surprised he let me work as long as I did.

"Moderation, little mate," he murmurs to me, turning me towards the door where Cora waits with little Rafe curled up in her arms.

“We’ll start again tomorrow,” Cora says, smiling at me and handing me my baby even though I’m still held lightly in Sinclair’s arms. “You did amazing today, Ella!” And I grin at her, happy to see that her own face reflects my excitement. The things we could do with this power

But Sinclair just nods to Cora and carries me from the room, even as I call goodbyes and goodnights to the men still laying in their beds. He doesn’t put me down, in fact, until we get to our little metal bedroom door – and then I think he only does so because neither of us have a free hand to turn the doorknob.

“In,” he urges once the door is open, pressing a hand to the small of my back and ushering me inside. I do as he says, cooing down to Rafe, who burbles sleepily in my arms. As soon as I get the baby ready for bed and down in his cradle, Sinclair takes my hand and directs me again, this time towards the bathroom.

“So bossy tonight,” I laugh, letting him guide me, and he shoots me a little glaring smile over his shoulder as he brings me into the bathroom. He doesn’t turn the lights on and I’m glad he doesn’t the bathroom only has horrible florescent light bulbs. Instead, Sinclair just turns on the shower in the dark and begins to strip himself down. And then, once he’s finished, he peels off my clothes piece by piece and nudges me towards the shower.

I take his suggestion silently, stepping into the steaming water and taking a deep breath. Sinclair follows, wrapping his arms around me and letting me rest against him as I let the hot water do its work, letting it relax me, letting me realize how tired I really am.

“How do you feel?” Sinclair murmurs, his voice barely audible above the pounding of the water.

“Tired,” I sigh in reply, winding my arms around him, enjoying the press of his wet skin against mine. “You were right. I – I’m more tired than I thought I was.”

“Is it bad?” he asks, going a little tense beside me. “Do we need to -”

“No,” I interrupt, shaking my head. “It’s a good tired – like after a busy day. But you’re right – my adrenaline was running me. It’s it’s good. To take a minute.”

Sinclair murmurs his affirmation, which rumbles warm in his chest, and then moves away from me for a minute to get some supplies. And then, to my delight and surprise, my mate begins to soap my body down, his movements soft but efficient.

“It’s incredible what you can do, Ella,” Sinclair says as he works the soap over my back. “But we have to be careful with it. Both for any tolls it takes on your body and...”

I open my eyes now, turning towards him. “And?” I ask, confused. “And what?”

“Ella,” he sighs, looking down at me. I’m worried that...well, that if people find out what you can do...”

“Oh,” I say, my eyes going wide. And I look towards the door, to where our baby is asleep in the next room. I want, quite suddenly, to have my eyes on him again. “You think that...”

“I think that if everyone knew what you could do,” Sinclair confirms gently, that people would want to direct you to use the gift how they see fit. By force, if necessary.”

My face falls, then, as I realize that he’s right. At the disappointment that I feel, that some would see this gift as a point of control instead of for the ways that it could help. My heart sinks, suddenly – with exhaustion, with disappointment, with wanting, terribly, for things to just be better – for things to be right –

“It’s all right,” Sinclair whispers, pulling me against him again, and I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to believe him. “It will be all right.”

“So, we’ll keep it a secret,” I say quietly after a few moments. “Not forever, though, yes?” I ask, looking up at him. “Sinclair – I can’t I can’t keep this to – myself forever, not if it can help people. I can’t live like that.”

“I know, love,” he murmurs to me, looking down into my face in the dim light. “But until we have more control...”

I nod, agreeing. “Until we have more control.” Sinclair watches me carefully when we get up the next morning, as I change and feed Rafe and get the day started.

“I feel fine!” I say to him, smiling and laughing, knowing that he’s waiting for me to collapse or something.

“And the gift?” he asks as he stands from the bed, still wary. “Does it feel...I don’t know. Intact?”

I take a moment to pause, closing my eyes and checking in on myself. “It feels,” I say, considering, truly trying to assess. Then I open my eyes and shrug at him. “Honestly, Dominic, it feels like it always has. I don’t feel like any of it has been lost in the effort to heal the men, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t think it works like that.”

“How do you think it works?” Sinclair asks, moving to the little table that holds our clothes and starting to get dressed for the day.

"I think the gift is an expression of the Goddess' love," I say, picking Rafe up from the little table we've designated as his changing table once he's ready to go. "I think it's limitless."

"Interesting," Sinclair murmurs, pulling a shirt over his head. He opens his mouth to say more, but suddenly there's a knock at the door. Frowning a little, Sinclair moves over to it and pulls it open, revealing Henry there, his face serious.

"Hello, Henry," I call, moving over and turning Rafe in my arms so that grandfather and grandson can say good morning. Henry can't help the smile that comes to his face when he sees Rafe, but it's short lived.

"Good morning, Ella, Dominic," he says. "Would you be so kind as to come to the conference room? We have much to discuss."

"Oh," I say, looking up at Sinclair. "I was going to go to the medical room – "

"I understand that you are doing important work there, Ella," Henry says, leaning forward to catch my attention again. "I won't keep you for long. But please – it is important. Roger and Cora are already there."

"We'll be there," Sinclair says, nodding quickly to his dad. "Just a minute, to finish getting dressed. All right?"

Henry nods and rolls his chair away, heading back to the conference room, as I look up at Sinclair in wonder.

What on earth could be happening now?

Chapter 360 – Conference

Ella

When Sinclair and I come into the conference room hand-in-hand, the baby wrapped up and held in my other arm, my eyes go wide to see everyone waiting there. I want, immediately, to ask if this is a confrontation again – like the last time, when they all gathered first to decide how to tell me that I have an evil uncle who is trying to steal my kid.

But as Sinclair closes the door behind us, Henry sees the anxiety on my face. “It is just chance, Ella,” Henry tells me evenly, “that you are last here. I promise you that. Blame the baby – you need more time in the mornings than the rest of us.”

I exhale quickly in relief and then mockingly glare down at the baby, earning a few laughs from the assembled company. I smile around at everyone and realize that it looks like the entire team has been assembled. I’m particularly pleased to see that a few of the men I healed yesterday are here. It makes my heart soar to think that they’re well enough to join in, rather than being restricted their beds.

Before I can say anything, though, Sinclair tugs at my hand, leading me around to the empty chair next to Cora who gives me a bright smile and leans over to say good morning to Rafe – before he moves to his own spot at the center of the table, next to his father and his brother.

“Thank you,” Henry says when Sinclair nods to him to let him know that he’s ready. Then, he looks around at our assembled group, who all look to him with curious eyes.

“There have been some developments,” Henry begins, “both internally and externally. To begin, Ella and Cora have found a way to speed the healing of our men who were injured during our first mission.” He nods to us here, and I’m curious about his

language. Henry came to see me work yesterday, and was as impressed as the rest of us. But I note that his language is vague enough now to suggest that the healing is moving faster, but not how.

Obviously some of the men in the room know how I did it – they were there – but it appears as if Henry is keeping the news of my gift as secret as he can, even amongst our own people. I don’t know how I feel about that – but there’s no time to truly consider it as he moves on.

“This is lucky news,” Henry continues, “as it means that we may be able to launch another assault faster than we thought possible, with our men again fully able. And unfortunately, it seems as if this must be necessary.”

I feel the anxiety rise in me at this news and I look sideways at Cora to see that her expression is the same as mine – a little pale, worried. Neither of us want our mates out there again anytime soon not after we saw that one single priest could do.

I turn my attention back to the men and see Sinclair looking steadily at his father, nodding to him, encouraging him to explain his analysis.

“We have more evidence now than we did before,” Henry continues, “that Xander, brother to the dead king Xavier, is indeed the main force behind the kidnapping attempts on my grandson. This comes especially from our discovery that the doctor whom Ella had been seeing for fertility treatments previous to her switch to Cora’s sperm bank, was, indeed, connected to Xander. Ella’s previous physician is in fact the child of the man who had long served Xander and Xavier’s family as personal physician.”

“Oh,” I can’t help myself from saying, and then I raise my hand to my lips, sorry to have interrupted. But I’m surprised – I mean, I knew that that doctor had pointed me in the wrong direction but to hear that I had an uncle who set it all up...

I shake my head, considering that this betrayal has been in the works for such a long time.

Beside me, my sister reaches out to take my hand, giving me a little squeeze of support. I turn to her and smile a little, grateful for her, before turning to look down at my little baby. I mean, no one wanted him to be born as much as me, but to think that my uncle had been planning it for so long...

“Yes,” Henry says, watching me from his spot down the table. “I apologize, Ella, if the news comes as a shock. But the connection is too stark for it to be a coincidence. My advice, now that we know and now that we are closer to having a full force of men – is to move as swiftly as we can, while we can still have some advantage in the situation. To the best of our intel, Xander does not yet know that we know he was involved – that he is the “master” to which this priest referred. It would be to our benefit to attack while we still have this advantage.”

Apparently finished, Henry sits back in his seat. Debate breaks out here, but I only turn half an ear to it, spending my time instead staring down at my little boy. I hear Roger ask some important questions like where Xander is now, and how well defended.

Sinclair counters Henry’s plan by suggesting that we may be better off waiting until Xander knows that we know it is him – rattling him, as Xander has never been a notoriously brave character,

especially considering that he’s played all of his cards from the safety of his own home rather than boldly going out to take control of the situation himself.

“So much depends on you, little baby,” I murmur to Rafe as the conversation continues. And I sigh a little anxious sigh as I watch my baby look around the busy room, his eyes – I know – not really understanding anything, but alert and interested anyway. I clench my teeth then, hating it. Hating that this man I’ve never met is putting such pressure on my little child.

Rafe is just a baby – a perfect, innocent little soul. And yet he is already being figured as a figurehead behind which my uncle can hide, as a political pawn that someone else can use to gain power. It horrifies me to consider that Rafe was created as a reaction, in some ways, to my mate’s powerful ascension to the throne: as a way to combine royal blood with powerful blood, to create a ruler to whom no one could reasonably object.

But really, really?

This is my child, created by me, carried by me, loved by me. And it fills me with a very real rage that there are people in this world who view him as a bargaining chip rather than the wonderful, loved miracle he is.

That rage is burning deep within me as I raise my head and realize that the room has gone silent and everyone has turned to me. I don’t have it in me to apologize for not listening, though. Instead, I just look at Sinclair, knowing that he will understand.

“It is your uncle, Ella,” Sinclair says quietly. “Your blood. We will take him out fast tonight, if we can. We think it is best. But we won’t do it without your assent.”

It barely takes a moment – a single blink for me to decide.

“Do it,” I say, my voice cold. “Tear his throat out. But before you do, tell him that I wanted him dead. That I ordered it done. Please.” And then I stand up and look down to Cora. “We have work to do, yes?”

Cora grins at me, proud and a little vicious herself, as she stands up and takes my hand.

I then look towards Sinclair, who gives me a deep nod, agreeing. And then, as one, Cora and I leave the room, heading towards our makeshift little medical suite to continue healing the men, to get them ready for the fight which I know is coming soon.

As the door begins to close behind us, I hear Henry’s words.

“All right. Let’s get started on a plan of attack.”

Chapter 361 – Secret Hours

Coral

Ella and I work the rest of the morning, me making the big decisions about who needs the most medical care next and taking Rafe from her when she's working. I watch every time she heals someone, unable to tear my eyes away from it. And while I thought I would be jealous – honestly, my sister is doing better work than I ever have as a doctor – I can only feel thrilled that we have this incredible tool in our hands.

Especially, especially considering that Roger came to tell me a few hours ago that they plan to attack tonight. That he and Sinclair are, again, going to put their lives on the line to stop this horrible man who wants to hurt our family.

Just the bare idea that Ella can help if they come home in pieces....

I close my eyes for a moment – Rafe sleeping in my arms while Ella settles down and starts talking with her next patient – dismissing the thought. Because if I start to think about what could happen tonight...

I'll never be able to let him go. I feel a warm presence beside me as my eyes are closed and smile a little, because I know immediately who it is. And I'm gratified to find that I was right when I open my eyes and see my beautiful mate standing there next to me, smiling down into my face.

"Hello, gorgeous," Roger says softly.

"Are you talking to me?" I ask, "or the baby?"

"Well," Roger says, looking down and pretending to consider little sleeping Rafe, "I mean he's cute, but I'm not sure I'd go so far as to say gorgeous.

I laugh a little, shaking my head, but Roger just smiles at me again and raises a hand to my cheek. "How are you holding up?"

"Oh it's all easy for me," I say, turning towards him with a grin and nodding towards Ella. "She does all the work."

He laughs a little and we both turn towards her then, watching the miracle get started. "Can you take a break?" he whispers, not wanting to disturb. "When this one is done?"

"Why?" I whisper back, confused, but not taking my eyes away. "Do you need something?"

"No," he replies with a little shrug. Just...a lull. I wanted a moment to check in with you

before we start getting ready to go.”

My stomach twists a little at his words but I nod, reaching out to take his hand. A break will be good.

When Ella finishes with her current patient we quickly consult about the plan to take a short break to talk to our mates and she agrees eagerly, taking the baby and hurrying out of the room to find Sinclair. Roger takes my hand and we follow after her, heading towards our own shabby little barracks room to take a minute to ourselves.

He doesn't bother to turn the light on when we enter our room, instead just closing the door and leading me over to the bed. I'm pleased by this – pleased that I want what he wants in this moment, which is just a quiet minute alone with him. Roger lays down first and then I lay my body close next to his, putting my head on his chest and letting my arm trail over his body, holding him close.

“How's the baby?” I murmur, wanting to know. Roger takes a deep breath and, even though I can't see him, I know that he's closing his eyes, concentrating on his bond with the baby and assessing how the little bean is doing.

“Baby's doing good,” he sighs happily, pulling me close to him. Then, with a little chagrin that makes me laugh, he continues. “I think this baby is going to be a workhorse like you. It's getting all sorts of messages from you that busy means happy. You're a bad influence.”

I laugh and this, giving him a little smack on the chest. “What,” I ask, “do you want the baby to be lazy like you?”

“To begin,” he counters, and I can almost feel him shoot me a little glare, “I am not lazy. I merely...prioritize and enjoy my down time. You could benefit from some lazy in your life, Cora.” He begins to run a hand slowly across my shoulders now. “I could make it worth your while,” he murmurs suggestively.

I laugh a little and snuggle closer to him, feeling my spirit renew after even a few quiet moments alone with him. “I think you might be right, Roger,” I start – but my words are cut off when he gasps.

“What?” he asks dramatically, “one of the Reina sisters, admitting that a Sinclair is right?!”

I laugh again and snuggle closer. Don't tease me,” I murmur, “or I won't do it again.” He laughs and relents, letting me continue. “But yes,” I sigh. ” I think that I have in my life thrown myself into my work as a way to feel like I was...doing something. Being productive. Being useful. But I think...” I hesitate now, trying to put my thoughts together.

"I think this little baby is going to have enough of that as it is," I sigh.

"What do you mean?" Roger asks worried but interested.

"Well," I consider. "I mean – Rafe was conceived because a man wanted him to be born – because he has royal blood, and goddess blood, and Sinclair blood. And while our baby was...more spontaneous," I say, smirking a little at the memory of how our child was conceived, "I can't help but think, Roger, that..."

"That something was conspiring to get us together," he sighs, nodding. "That we were kind of forced off the road by an insane storm the day you were ovulating."

"Yeah," I sigh, hugging him tighter now, a little afraid. "And..."

"What?" he asks, encouraging.

"Well," I whisper, "I was thinking about...Ella, today. Watching her access our mother's gift. And then I was holding Rafe the whole time. And Roger ...I think that Xander wanted Rafe to be conceived mostly because of his royal blood – but I think what has been underestimated here is the fact that Rafe is the grandson of a goddess. And our child will be too. What if these children have access to the same kind of gift that Ella has..."

"Do you have the gift?" Roger asks, curious.

"I can wield it," I point out, "when Ella passes it to me."

"Why didn't you guys get two?" he asks. "I don't know," I say, frowning. "Maybe one was enough. Or...maybe because Ella asked for it when we were out in the desert."

"Do you want it?" he asks, quiet. "If you were to ask your mother for your own gift... would you want that?"

"I don't know," I whisper, truly trying to weigh the question. "Because on one hand it would be wonderful to do what Ella does with the gift – to save live likes that? But also... if it means that the baby would inherit such a thing..."

"That kind of pressure," he murmurs.

"And that kind of target," I add, shaking my head. "I don't know. I just don't know, Roger."

"Well," he says quietly, and I can feel him turn towards me, scootching down on the bed so that our faces are close together now. "Why don't we go to your mom and ask?"

Chapter 362 – Farewell

Cora

“What?” I ask, laughing a little, thinking that he’s kidding. “What are you talking about?”

“Go see your mom,” Roger continues, giving a little shrug. “Like we did with Ella, in the desert. Honestly, I think it was kind of rude of your mom at that moment to focus all on Ella and pretend that she wasn’t your mom too

“Roger,” I sigh, shaking my head. “You can’t call a goddess rude. We were on a mission and honestly, Ella went there to speak with her mother. I didn’t know – and I wasn’t ready. She’s a goddess you have to assume that she does things on her own time. For her own reasons.”

“I don’t know why you’re being so nice about it,” Roger growls, a little perturbed. “If I were you I’d be mad.”

“Yes, baby,” I murmur, “but you’re always mad.” This earns a little laugh from him, but I continue after a moment. “It’s hard to explain it,” I say quietly. “But when I held the gift – when I gave it to the world...Roger, I felt her love for me then. It was very rich and very real. She doesn’t love Ella more than she loves me. She’s just waiting for me to be ready.”

“Well?” he asks, nudging me with his nose. “Are you ready?”

I laugh a little, again thinking that he’s not serious.

“Really, Cora,” Roger urges, pulling back a little. “I think we should do it. We have all of these questions – about you, about the baby, about her and her plans for you. Why not? When this is all cleaned up when we have a minute to spare, let’s go on a little pilgrimage to one of your mother’s temples, like we did when we went to go find Reina. Let’s go...have a chat.”

I stop laughing when I consider it – consider if I want it.

“Plus,” he adds, tracing a finger over the soft skin between my shoulder and neck. “We can ask what will happen if I give you my mark. Because my damn wolf won’t shut up about it.”

I laugh, pleased. “What does he say?”

“He says, ‘bite her! Now!’” Roger murmurs, frustrated, and I laugh harder now to hear it, considering that it must be difficult having a wolf interrupting your thoughts all the time.

“And he says it at the most frustrating times,” Roger continues. “Like when we’re just having dinner – like I’m going to jump across the table and grab you or something. Or when you’re just walking down the hall and I happen to glance at your ass. Or when you’re asleep –

“When I’m asleep!?” I gasp, laughing. Roger do not bite me in my sleep-

“I won’t,” he growls, shaking his head. “But it’s seriously annoying – he wants you to have it.” And then his voice shifts a little in tone. “I want you to have it, Cora. I want the baby to feel it too.”

“I want it,” I sigh, reaching out to stroke his face. “I do.” And then I nod, decided, as my hand goes to my stomach and I think about the baby and all the things we need to know. “All right,” I whisper. “We’ll do it. When we’re able to get back to a more normal life, when this is all fixed? We’ll go see my mom.”

“Really put the screws to her,” Roger murmurs, and I can feel his smirk. “Ask her what the hell is going on with this mark, and this crazy hybrid baby. And why those priests were following you as well as Ella your whole life.”

“Okay, well, let’s not go that far,” I laugh, shaking my head. “Honestly, Roger only you would have the idea to ‘put the screws’ to a Goddess.”

“Anyone who messes with my mate,” he growls, a little territorial but also a little kidding, “has to go through me.’

“Okay, puppy,” I murmur, patting him on the head and smiling. “Calm down.”

Roger snarls and shakes my hand away. “Call me puppy again,” he warns, shifting his body again so that he looms over me. “And I’ll put the screws to you, little mate.”

“Awwww,” I say, cooing mockingly. “Lil puppy get mad? Not like his new name?”

Roger growls again, snapping his teeth at me, and then he presses his lips to mine in a fierce kiss, determined to teach me a lesson.

Ella

After Sinclair and I take an hour or two alone with Rafe, we part ways so that he can get himself and his troops ready and I can go back to the medical room to continue healing. I’m on my way there, Rafe’s little carrier in my hands, when I spy Cora in the kitchen making a cup of tea. And suddenly, that’s precisely what I want.

“Hey,” I say, breezing into the room and lifting Rafe’s carrier up onto the counter. “Can

you make me a cup as well?"

"Sure, sis," Cora says, giving me a little smile. And, sensing something, I lean closer to her, sniffing the air around her.

"Ohhhh," I say, my face breaking into a wide grin. "Someone had a nice afternoon with their mate."

Cora snaps her head to me, shocked, and then she bursts out laughing before giving me a little push. "Ew, Ella! If you can smell that on me, please do us all the favor of pretending you don't."

"Why?" I say, leaning on the counter and rocking Rafe's carrier a little in an attempt to lull him to sleep – it's time for him to take a nap, and he's almost there, I can tell. "I'm glad you and Roger are finding such a good connection. I'm not embarrassed by it."

"Well," she sighs, but I can still see a smile on her face, "please remember that your sister is human and not as crass as you wolf folks."

"You mean more of a prude," I say, laughing at her but letting it drop. She laughs along with me, shaking her head as she pours boiling water into two mugs. Then she stirs a tea bag into each and turns to me while they steep.

"How are you feeling?" she asks, looking me up and down. "Nervous about tonight?"

"Obviously," I murmur. And then, my eyes flicking to the side to ensure we're alone, I take a step closer. "Honestly, Cora, I was thinking about going along

"What?!" she gasps.

"I could do it!" I say, grabbing her hand. "I could just like, sneak into a trunk as they're pulling away! And you know I would be useful – I could be on hand to heal them as they went! I could save lives – "

"Don't be ridiculous, Ella," Cora scoffs, frowning at me and pulling her hand away. "Sinclair would kill you and even if he didn't, someone else would! You would ruin it, because there's no way he'd let you stay – he'd make everyone turn around to drive you home!"

"He would not!" I protest. "He wouldn't give up the element of surprise! He'd be forced to _"

"Really, Ella?" Cora says, leaning against the counter and raising an eyebrow at me. "That's your plan? To make your mate choose between your safety and having the

element of surprise on your enemy?"

I scowl, realizing that she's right – that all I'd be doing horrible position. putting him in a

Then I sigh, giving up the plan for good. "I just hate feeling helpless," I say, looking down at the floor and shaking my head. "Especially as we know now that I can be such a big help."

"I get it, Ellie," Cora says, taking a step towards me to wrap me in a hug. "I really do. That's why I wanted to go last time – for the same reasons."

We both look at each other for a long moment then, and I'm so selfishly pleased, suddenly, that my sister and Roger found each other. Because now we each have someone who truly understands the other.

Because certainly no one else in the world right now knows the pain of sending your mate off on what could realistically be a mission with a death sentence.

But what's the alternative?

In so many ways, I feel continually backed into a corner by this whole process. Like as every day passes I am being forced closer and closer to having to make a choice between the two people I love most.

Who do you choose to survive? The universe seems to be asking me. Your mate or your child?

Chapter 363 – Trouble, Trouble, Trouble

Ella

Cora and I stand silently in the garage of the bunker, watching our mates pack their cars in preparation for their assault. Rafe is in my arms, fussing unhappily, and Henry has rolled his chair up on Cora's other side, likewise watching tensely.

"It will be finished tonight," Henry says, nodding confidently. "I know it. The boys will finish this."

"I hope you are right, Henry," I sigh. "I don't know how much longer I can keep sending him off like this."

Henry looks up at me, sympathy in his eyes, but I can't return his gaze – I'm too overwhelmed. Instead, I look down at my little red baby, who is now crying unhappily in my arms.

Minutes – I know we've got minutes left until Roger and Sinclair leave. And I can barely take it.

"Come here, mini trouble," Sinclair murmurs, and I jump a little as I realize that he's close to me now, reaching out for the baby. I was too lost in my thoughts. I look up at my mate, my eyes filled with tears, and silently hand over the baby in to his waiting arms.

He doesn't turn his attention to Rafe, though, instead putting out his other arm to wrap around me. I rest my head against his chest, looking away from him. But my eyes just fall on Cora and Roger, saying their own goodbyes next to me, and I can't take that either.

So I turn my head in the other direction, pressing my eyes shut.

"It will be okay, Ella," Sinclair whispers to me, the baby going quiet in his arms, as he always does, "I promise you, it will be okay."

"I know you'll do everything you can, Dominic," I whisper. "I trust you – it's just the rest of the world, and what it has in store, that I can't trust."

He nods, understanding, and then presses a kiss to my hair, pulling away too soon.

"No," I gasp, wrapping my hand around the strap of his bullet-proof vest and keeping him close.

"Ella," he murmurs, turning my face up to him with a touch of his fingers beneath my chin. And I stare up at him, my beautiful, tender, ferocious mate. I'm coming back to you.

Tonight. And then we'll have peace."

"You'd better," I growl, narrowing my eyes at him. "Or I am going to be very mean to your ghost."

Sinclair laughs at this, shaking his head and passing the baby back to me. Then he presses a kiss to my mouth, tells me he loves me, and turns towards his car. Cora moves close to me next, slipping her hand around my elbow with a big sigh.

"This is it, Ella," she says. "The big push. After this, we'll have peace."

"I feel like I've been hearing that a lot, Cora," I say as I turn to look at her, my bad spirits getting the best of me for just a moment.

"Well," she says, her lips twitching a little towards a smile as she holds the hope for both of us. "At some point, it's got to be right."

And together, we watch our mates and their team pull out of the garage and drive away. Predictably, things are simultaneously boring and tense once the boys are gone.

"What should we do?" Cora asks as the three of us file into the little kitchen and sink down around the table. The bunker isn't totally quiet – there's still a good number of people left here.

Mostly those persons who are still too ill to join the assault team, or those members whose skills lie more in research than in war.

It's good to have more people around, but still, I know that the three of us feel like we're the only people in the world right now, so united are we in our misery. Or, well, four people, if we're including Rafe. But I sigh as I look down at the little baby, who is falling asleep now. "You don't even know what's going on, baby," I murmur, a little jealous.

"I think," Henry says, dipping a hand into the pocket of his wheelchair and coming out with a deck of cards. "That this is a moment that calls for a distraction."

Cora perks up a little. "Nothing says distraction like a couple hands of high-stakes poker," she quips. I smile at her, knowing that Cora loves cards. She's clever and precise enough with them to be a bit of a card sharp. That's how she kept us supplied with pocket money and candy in the orphanage, after all.

"Yes," I say, leaning forward a little eagerly. "Now that the boys are gone, let's gamble away all their money," I say, perking up myself at the idea. "Show them what they get for going off to war without us."

“Only fair,” Henry murmurs as he shuffles and we sit, a little smile playing at his lips. “What shall the buy in be, ladies? Half a million? Each of my sons’ first-born child?”

“Why not both?” I ask, grinning.

Two hours later, Henry has put us both to shame and earned not only a million dollars but also apparent ownership of his two grandchildren.

“Here you go,” I sigh, pretending to hand the sleeping baby off to him. “He’s all yours now.”

Henry laughs and puts up a hand. “I’ll let you maintain ownership for now,” he laughs, pulling the cards towards him to put them neatly back in their box. “I know you’re fond of him, after all. I’ll call for him when I am ready to put him to work.”

“What about this one,” Cora says, looking down at her still-flat tummy. She cocks her head to the side and smirks at Henry. “Should we agree on a lay-away plan for this one as well?”

Henry laughs again and shakes his head, opening his mouth to reply, but suddenly there’s a huge bang from down the hall from the entrance to the bunker.

The three of us go silent, tensely turning towards the door, waiting to see

BOOM.

It comes again, followed by the creaking of metal.

“Shit,” Henry curses – something that makes me turn to him with wide eyes. Never, ever have I heard him utter a curse before.

This, more than the banging, lets me know that something is truly wrong.

Quick as a whip, Henry grabs his phone from its place on the table, glancing at it. “Nothing else from the boys,” he murmurs, slipping the phone into the pocket of his chair and starting to roll towards the door. “Come,” he snaps at us. “Now, Ella, Cora. Come now.”

We both jump to our feet, our hands shaking again as BOOM –

Rafe is still in my arms but some piece of me thinks to grab his carrier as Cora and I follow Henry. As I leave the kitchen I turn towards the bunker entrance towards the huge metal door that seals us in here. And to my horror, I can see it beginning to peel back at the corner. I go pale realizing – Realizing that someone is trying to get in

“Oh my god,” Cora gasps, raising trembling hands to her mouth. “Henry

“COME!” he commands, wheeling fast down the hall against a wave of our own men who all come out of their rooms, heading towards the door.

My sister and I are in action as the hall fills with more noise – more pounding from the door, the shouts of our men – Henry’s own insistent calls to follow him –

We catch up with him as Henry wheels fast into the conference room, and we look around at the worried faces of the few men who are still in here, working on some new plans –

“GO!” Henry barks at them. “Can’t you see we’re under attack!? Go! Defend your Luna!”

Chapter 364 – Assault

Ella

As the startled men hurry out of the conference room, Henry turns to Cora and I, looking at us with a grim expression as we stare at him in terror.

“I have made a grave miscalculation,” he informs us with a steady, regretful nod. “I am sorry, girls – I have failed you – ”

“Wha- what?” I gasp, holding my baby tight. “Henry – what are you talking about?”

“It was a trap,” he says, looking towards the door, where we can still hear the banging – increased in pace now – as well as shouts, the beginning of screams –

“A trap?” Cora asks, turning towards the door herself.

“They knew,” he says, and I’m still staring at Henry as he shakes his head. “They must followed us back here after the sewer and then bided their time, waiting for the bulk of our forces – and our most powerful wolves – to leave before they attacked. Damn it!” he shouts, slamming a frustrated hand against the arm of his chair. “I was a fool, to leave you and the child unguarded!”

“Oh my god,” I whisper, my voice trembling as I try to wrack my brain for something – anything to do next –

“Come,” Henry says, pulling himself together and rolling quickly to the corner of the room. There, he points to the edge of the carpet. “Cora,” he orders. “Pull that up.”

Cora does as he says, instantly falling to her knees and digging her hands into the corner of the carpet, getting her fingers beneath and pulling as hard as she can. I can’t help my surprise when I see what is revealed when she pulls enough of it back.

A trap door.

“Open it,” Henry snaps, and Cora does so, lifting the little latch and swinging the door up to reveal a very thin winding staircase that leads down, down, down.

“Go,” Henry orders, not looking to us and nodding towards it.

“Henry,” I protest, shaking my head. “ We can’t leave you.”

Sudden screams start to burst out from the hallway, making me jump. And then my face drops in horror as I hear gunfire as well.

“You will go, Ella,” Henry growls, wrapping his hand around my arm and shoving me towards the passage. “Go down. Keep going. At the bottom is a tunnel, and at the end of it, a car. God willing it is in good repair. You must run as far and as fast as you can.”

Then he takes his phone out of the pocket of his chair and presses it into my hand. “Tell them what happened as soon as you are out. But don’t tell them where you are until you get to a different phone. Who knows – ”

He sighs, and puts his head in his hands, and I can see his shoulders shaking. “There’s not enough time.”

The noise in the hall grows louder and my breath comes faster as I realize what we have to do.

“All right,” I say, nodding to Cora and then swooping down to kiss Henry on the cheek. “Henry, we love you. We’ll – we’ll come back for you.”

“Don’t,” he says, his eyes only on Rafe now, who squalls unhappily in my arms at all the noise. “Take the baby – take yourselves. Get safe girls. I love you too.”

And then Cora and I are moving, my heart wrenching to leave him – to leave him like this –

Cora goes down the twisting stair first and I follow quickly after, reaching out to hand her the phone so that she can light our way and the baby carrier so I can balance Rafe more safely in my arms. After Cora takes these supplies, I turn my face upwards to say a last word to Henry –

But the door snaps shut above me, leaving me in darkness.

“Ella,” Cora cries, “Ella please – come we have to go -”

“I’m coming, Cora,” I say, swallowing my horrible fear and steeling myself for all we have to do next. We have to survive. We have to get out of here – for the babies to warn our mates –

I open my eyes and look determinedly down at her. “Let’s go.”

Cora nods to me once, and then she starts again down the stairs.

Sinclair

“Any word?” Roger asks me as our men begin to unload themselves from the cars. We’ve arrived at our place of entrance, which I grimace again to see is a sewer.

I'm aware that this is the best way in –

that through this public sewer we can begin to access unseen the roads closest to Xavier's stronghold. But still, if I never went in another sewer for the rest of my life, that would be fine by me.

"Nothing new," I say, glancing at my phone, where I've been keeping in touch with my father. "Apparently they're playing poker."

"Oh," Roger says, his eyebrows raising in pleasure. "Well, good. Cora will clean up at that."

"Yeah," I mutter, tucking my phone away. "I have a feeling that Ella bet the house."

"Good," Roger says again, grinning at me. "I always liked your house. Do you think you can be out by the end of the week?"

I don't say anything, just shooting him a little glare, but I can't help but smile a little bit. Roger's certainly in a good mood, which makes me feel better.

But still I have to admit that there's... something roiling in my gut. Something tugging at my instincts that just says wrong wrong.

But I push it aside, even though my wolf howls to see me do it. We're on a mission, after all, and we're short on time. I'm not going to call this off just because it doesn't feel perfect.

I look around at the men ranged around me. "Ready?" I ask, and I get a series of nods all around. "Forward, then," I say, nodding to them and pointing towards the sewer entrance.

The men go first this time, taking the lead so that Roger and I can bring up the tail. We'll switch when we get closer to the assault itself, which should bring us, interestingly, right up into Xavier's property, if not up into his house itself.

It's good luck that the sewer connects so close there, but my wolf still prowls within me, snarling too good too easy – not right –

But I shake my head, watching my men disappear in the tunnel, dismissing my wolf's nerves. After all, where were these hesitations when we planned the assault? Nothing has changed. We're pressing forward, and that's the end of it.

When each of our thirty men has disappeared into the sewer, Roger steps forward to go

next. "All right, brother?" he asks, looking at me before he disappears into the dark. "You're not quite yourself."

"I'm fine," I snap, tucking my phone into the pocket of my pants. "Prepare yourself. We've got about forty-five minutes of darkness and radio silence down there," I inform him, slipping into the sewer after him. "We're not going to get any cell signal down there."

"No worries, bro," Roger says, grinning at me in the darkness as I re-seal the entrance. "I know enough showtunes to whistle along the way. I'll keep you entertained."

And then, shaking my head at my brother but grateful to have him by my side, I begin the assault.

Chapter 365 – Assault

Sinclair

We move quickly through the sewers, getting to our launching point in less time than I had estimated it would take. I glance at my phone, not anticipating that we'd have been able to receive any messages from our home base, but disappointed regardless.

As our men range themselves on either side of the exit to the sewer, which will open directly onto Xander's property, Roger turns to me.

"Ready for this?" he asks, his face tight.

I simply nod to him, doing my best to ignore my wolf prowling anxiously inside my chest. Then, as one, my brother and I move forward to the front of the line. If there's any unexpected fire, I want us to take it – not our men.

Our men stand tense behind us in two lines as Roger slowly, silently, pushes open the door. And then, with one final glance at him, I'm through.

I pull myself out of the sewer and find myself in a garden with significant cover, which is good. We sent a drone to scope out the landscape, of course, but we hadn't quite been able to discern the height of the plants. I crouch down immediately, looking around for anything suspicious, but am greeted only by silence – just the cool sounds of a large suburban garden at night.

I turn towards the Tudor house to my left – Xander's home, where he's been living since his brother left the throne. It looks...almost too innocent, too nice, to be housing such a maniacal man – who plots to get unsuspecting women pregnant and steal their babies. I shake my head, hating him anew, and then I turn back to the sewer to gesture my brother and our men forward.

As they filter out of the sewer behind me, I move forward towards the house.

Our father did good work in the past days – we have plans of the house from the city that were updated only ten years ago when Xander, apparently needing more space for his schemes, added a small extension. Those plans allowed us to identify an entrance to the house's basement through the garden which serves our needs well.

As I slink towards the house, I'm relieved to see that the entrance is precisely where we thought it would be. Nodding to Roger, asking him to wait, I skirt across a garden path and inspect the double doors that will lead to a set of steep stairs that head down into the basement. My eyes flit over the wooden doors, their rusty hinges and chipped paint. When I turn to the handles, I'm surprised to see that they're held shut with only a rusty old chain.

Frowning a little, I reach out and take the chain in my hand, giving it a hard, sharp yank. It falls to pieces.

I turn back to my brother, knowing that he's watching my every move. He frowns at the chain in my hand, and I know that his thoughts are echoing my own. Is this all...

Too easy! My wolf howls, pacing inside of me, his tongue hanging out of his mouth slathered in his stress. Can't be – too easy no-no- – turn around – try again –

I take a deep breath, shaking my head as I study the door. Honestly, it does feel too easy...

But are we going to turn this down? Walk away from the opportunity to infiltrate this man's house with a full stock of healthy men just because it's too easy? Isn't it also very possible that, after twenty-some years of going unnoticed, that Xander has just begun to think of himself as untouchable and dropped his guard?

I sigh, signaling Roger forward. He's at my side almost instantly.

"What do you think?" I murmur, looking between him and the doors.

"I'm suspicious," he says with a sigh, but then he just shakes his head. "But Dominic, I don't know when we're going to have a better chance to do this. If we can get inside... shouldn't we take the chance?"

I nod, agreeing, though my wolf snarls and snaps. I run a mental hand down his ruff, asking him to steady, but he shakes me off. I frown and shake my own head, determined regardless.

"Okay," I say, yanking one of the doors open and peering down into the basement. "Let's go."

Then I haul the other door up and slip down the narrow stone stairs, peering into the darkness with my keen vision and working hard to determine if there is anything waiting for us down here. When I see nothing, I signal Roger forward with me.

We both enter the basement, which is dusty and filled with a bunch of junk, but otherwise largely unremarkable. We sweep the room as quickly as we can, using our hearing and our senses of smell to determine if anything is down here but...

"I don't think anyone's been down here for months," Roger murmurs to me when we come back together. "I think...we keep going."

I nod, agreeing, and signal our men to follow, which they do..

When half are in the room, Roger and I move up the basement steps towards the first floor, listening closely for any noises from the house. But from our position behind the door, we can't hear anything.

I look down the stairs towards my men. The man in the lead nods to me, letting me know that we're all in, except for the two who we've left guard in the garden. Understanding, I flip on the radio on my shoulder so that we can stay in contact, knowing that once we go through this final door...

There's not going to be any need for secrecy. Then, glancing once more at Roger for any reason to stop – he just holds my gaze steadily I press open the door to the main house and slip through.

The house is quiet as if...well, as if it's the middle of the night, and everyone is upstairs sleeping. Or...I hesitate to think it but the thought pops into my mind...as if nobody's here at all.

Roger comes to stand next to me, surveying the kitchen for any threats, any reason to hesitate or attack....

But there's nothing. No one's here.

Our men start to come up the stairs behind us so Roger and I move through the kitchen towards the living room, looking for the stairway upstairs to the bedroom levels that I know starts there. But as we move – as our men continue to follow with us – I start to hesitate more.

Because because Xander is not an uncaredful man. He might be a recluse, and someone attuned to anonymity, but he's also someone who has contracted with priests of a dark god for decades, who had them following my mate and her sister for their entire lives...

So why doesn't he have any guards?

Not even one?

My head snaps back towards the kitchen as I hear a door slam. I see one of my soldiers flinch, looking back at the basement door in surprise, his eyes wide.

The door is shut but I can tell, when he looks at me, that he did not shut it. That the door, for all he can tell, shut itself.

My eyes fly back to Roger's at my side and we both instantly fall into defensive

crouches. "Shit," Roger says, looking all around. "I think -"

But before he can tell me what, light flares through the room. And around us, priests materialize from thin air, their hands glowing with spells, their faces lit with wicked grins.

Chapter 366 – Flee

Ella

Cora and I pound down the stairs, gasping for breath by the time we reach the bottom. She starts down the dark hall, holding Henry's phone out in front of her, its flashlight blaring through the darkness, but I cry out a little and grab her hand.

She turns to me, frantic, desperate to get away, but I beg her to wait just a moment. "The carrier," I say, reaching for it, "for the baby."

Understanding, she hands me Rafe's carrier and I quickly bend down to strap him into it, wanting to ensure that he's ready to get in the car as soon as we get there. As I work, Cora glances around the passage.

"A lot of spiderwebs down here," she murmurs, "I don't think anyone's been down here for a long time to do maintenance. I hope the car..." her words fade out as I stand up straight but I grimace at her, intuiting her thoughts and hoping that she's wrong.

That when we get to the car, it starts without a hitch. I nod to her that I'm ready and together my sister and I start to hurry down the hall, going as fast as we can without breaking into a run. The tunnel is long – longer than I thought it would be – and I'm starting to panic a little when we finally reach a door. Cora yanks it open.

The door leads to a very, very small space, with only a nondescript blue sedan tucked away in it. Cora dashes to the driver's seat as I open the back seat to the car, lifting Rafe's little carrier inside and buckling him in. Rafe is crying a little and I do my best to shush him, to tell him that it's okay, but I don't think it helps that my own voice and hands are shaking. If my baby does intuit my moods, as Sinclair thinks he does, then there's not a big chance that he's going to stop crying anytime soon.

As I buckle Rafe in Cora finds the car's keys tucked into the visor and quickly turns them in the ignition. We both breathe out in relief when the car starts and she flashes a smile over her shoulder at me. I pull myself out of the back seat after Rafe is buckled and

close the door behind me. Then, seeing a switch on the wall in front of the car, I quickly move to it and press it once. A mechanism starts to grind somewhere in the room but I don't bother to look for it, instead pulling the passenger door open and quickly slipping into my seat.

"Ready?" I ask Cora as I buckle my seatbelt.

"I have no idea, Ella," she murmurs, but she puts the car in drive and, when the wall before us folds upwards enough to reveal a steep driveway, she guns the engine so that we quickly climb the rise and find ourselves, to my surprise, deep in the woods.

When we get on flat ground, Cora pauses, looking around. "Where..." she murmurs, "where the hell is the road..."

"There is none," I say, glancing back at Rafe. "Just drive Cora – "

"There are trees everywhere!" she protests, waving a hand at all of them.

"There's got to be a way through," I say, shaking my head at her. "He – they wouldn't have put this car here if there wasn't a way to escape. Just go!"

Sighing with anxiety and frustration, Cora does as I say, starting to wind the car through the trees. And, to my surprise, I start to see a road. There's nothing marking it nothing mystical or magical about it but...it's almost as if someone really did clear a path here so that a car just this size could squeeze through...

"Okay," Cora says, laughing a little hysterically. "I think I get it now..."

"Look!" I shout, pointing forward to where, after a few minutes of driving, I start to see... asphalt? Something black stretching out before us. "Cora, is that a road?"

"I think so," she says, hope blooming in her voice. But just as the little road is starting to become clear before us, something slams into the car, making us scream in shock and surprise as we fishtail sideways and the back corner of the car slams into a tree.

I look around, frantic, and – there –

I gasp and go pale when I see, through the back window of the car, a priest in a dark robe standing, glaring at us, with two men at his side. The priest holds one hand tensed fiercely in a claw at his side, his fingers wreathed in shadow.

Cora looks back as well when she sees the direction of my gaze and she gasps too. "Shit! Ella! Shit!" And then, in complete panic, she slams her foot down on the gas in an attempt to get away.

But the wheels just spin beneath the car, finding no traction. And, as I watch, the two men and the priest start to move forward towards us.

Sinclair

"Go!" I scream at my brother as I move forward myself towards the priests, who are already beginning to hurl spells at me, at Roger, at my men Get out of here!"

Roger just roars and moves forward next to me, advancing on the priests at my side. His

answer is a clear and absolute no.

We take on a set of three priests together, transforming into our wolves and working in a pattern of attack and defense drilled into us since we were children – one of us advancing while the other holds the back, so our enemies who outnumber us – cannot slip by and attack our men. Still, even as we concentrate, even as we take on the brunt of the punishing spells that these priests hurl at us –

I can hear my men's screams behind me. I know that they're going down.

Roger and I work fast, both desperate to get back to the men, to help them. I take one priest by the throat and end him quickly, his blood dripping from my fangs as I turn to the other two. Their faces are afraid when they see how quickly their comrade goes down, but they are by no means unprepared. One stands behind the other, taking much the position that Roger and I are using, hurling spells at me while his comrade defends.

The spells alternately cut, burn, and freeze my flesh – but in the end, I work too fast for them, rearing up to my full height to pound the substantial weight of my body into the first man's shoulders, knocking him down and trapping the second man beneath him as well.

Roger comes in for the kill then, ending both with a snarl and tear at each of their throats. They leave this world gasping for air, their dying breaths bubbling the blood at the holes in their neck. As one, Roger and I turn back to the men, hurling ourselves back into the fray.

Only two more priests here – our men have taken down one more with their weapons, and with our aid we quickly take down the other two. As I survey the priests dead and dying forms I note, passively, that none of them is the priest we met before. The priest who was, comparatively, much more powerful than these men.

Sudden quiet reigns in the room beyond the shrieks and moans of our injured men as Roger and I transform back into our human bodies, looking all around us for the next threat –

But none comes.

Not yet.

“Roger,” I say, reaching for him, grabbing his arm.

“I know,” he says, shaking his head.

We turn to the men to issue the command, to retreat, but Conor is already at the door to the basement – or, at least, the space where it used to be. He looks up at us and shakes

his head. "It's gone, sir," he says, true fear in his eyes. "The door is just...gone."

"Fuck," I curse, running an anxious hand through my hair. "Dominic," Roger says, making me turn to him. Then he shakes his head at me, slow. "It's a trap."

"What?" I say, not understanding.

"They've covered the retreat," he says, gesturing towards the back door. "

They've sent enough men to stop us, but not to kill us," he shakes his head at me. "It's a trap, Dominic. They don't want us to move forward. They don't want us to move back." "They want us to stay here..." I murmur, trying to piece it together. " Why..."

But then, my eyes snap to Roger's just as his move to mine. "The girls," he says, shaking his head slowly, his voice low, desperate.

"They're keeping us here so they can get the girls..."

And then I tilt my head back and roar.

Chapter 367 – Trap

Ella

“Ella!” Cora screams as one of the men comes around her side of the car and starts to bash at her window with a crowbar, the glass cracking and then beginning to fall inside the car. But I have no time to respond I’m already – unbuckling my belt and throwing myself into the back seat towards my child, who screams bloody murder.

My eyes flash to the other side of the car, where another man is approaching, raising his own crowbar to begin bashing the windows. I panic now- we’re trapped, utterly trapped, no way to get out of the car –

He starts to smash at the back window, working to get in towards Rafe and I, and I make a snap decision, instantly transforming into my wolf and, as the crowbar breaks through the window, grabbing it between my teeth and yanking as hard as I can –

The man shouts, pulled off balance so that his arm is fully in the back of the car now, and I drop the crowbar – ignoring the ringing in my jaw and teeth- and snap again, higher this time, my teeth sinking into the flesh of his elbow and upper arm. He screams, trying to yank back, but I sink back into my haunches, snarling, letting him rip his arm to shreds as he tries to pull away from me –

He leaves quite a bit of blood behind as he withdraws his hand and arm from the car, dropping the crowbar as he goes – and I transform back into my body, turning towards my screaming son but distracted again as I hear Cora scream-

I gasp, spinning towards her, and see the man who broke into her window almost fully in the car now – grabbing her a knife in his hands-

And in horror I watch as he raises that knife high into the air and then sinks it, viciously, into the flesh of her back – and then wrenches his hand to the side to drag it through her flesh –

But before he can get far I am flying for him, my nails turning to talons at the edge of my fingers that I sink first deep into his arm –

As he shrieks and drops his knife, I rip my claws again over his face, his neck, his shoulders – anywhere I can reach

Screaming in fear, the man withdraws from the window to the left side of the car and I hurl myself out after him, shifting again into my wolf before leaping for him – savaging him in any way I can –

I don’t stop until he stops crying out, stops making noise, and then I turn to see the man

with the shredded arm leaning back into the car-reaching for my son and I leap for him next.

His death is quick, his life's blood running off my chin as I transform back into a woman, as I turn to look for the priest.

I turn to see him standing in front of the car, his dark magic still whirling around his hands and extending outwards towards the car, working to keep us in place.

"If you leave now," I growl, striding forward towards him, "I will let you live. But you have seconds to decide."

"Come for me, little girl," he laughs, beckoning me forward.

And so I do.

With a feral roar, I let my nails again extend into their talons, let my teeth sharpen into fangs, and then leap for him, ready to tear his flesh to shreds –

But before I can reach him, he moves his magic away from the car to wrap around me. I gasp, clawing at my throat as the dark shadows wrap around my neck, my feet kicking wildly as he lifts me into the air. And then, as I watch, he begins to murmur – begins to say some kind of spell –

And I feel my fangs shrink back – feel my claws retract back into my hands

And then he laughs at me again before lowering me, panting, back to the forest floor.

I stare at him in confusion, in wonder, for a second while he shakes his head at me. "What now, little girl?" he murmurs, cocking his head at me with a filthy smirk. "What do you have to fight with now that your wolf is gone?"

And I snarl – and try to transform but-

Nothing happens. I gasp, stumbling backwards a step as I try again

But – nothing –

And then I'm backing away from him, desperate, knowing that I – I can't fight him if I don't have my wolf –

And he takes one wicked step towards me when both of us snap our heads to the side at the sound of the car's tires squealing, the engine revving hard

And I gasp as the car slams into the priest, making him bend in half before sending him sailing to the forest floor where he hits his head, hard, against a long grey rock.

“Ella!” Cora gasps from the car and I’m instantly in motion, dashing for her –

I haul the driver’s-side door open and am almost sobbing by the time I set my eyes on her – – blood – so much blood and my sister covered in it-

“Cora!” I cry, reaching for her – but she’s moving away from me – and as I watch I realize that she’s moving into the passenger seat so that I can get into the driver’s seat so that I can drive.

“Ella,” she moans, looking around frantically, trying to assess the damage.

“Let’s go,” I growl, throwing myself into her abandoned seat, glancing quickly into the back seat at my screaming child, making sure that he’s still strapped in. Then, as soon as I slam the driver’s door behind me, we move.

I back up the car a few steps, staring at the priest who suddenly comes into view but who is not moving, a wide red puddle starting to form on the rock on which he landed. But then I move my eyes back to the road before us, hitting the gas hard and heading towards it.

We’re out of the forest in the flash, leaving the horrible scene behind. My breath is coming fast, my heart racing, my hands shaking as I try to at once concentrate on the road and assess my sister.

“Cora!” I yell, looking over at her, seeing her eyes closed. “Cora, talk to me!”

“I’m I’m okay,” she murmurs to me, – a heavy moan next on her lips.

“Tell me for real, Cora! Tell me what’s happening! Don’t try to save me from it!”

I press the car harder, flying down the roads at what is probably a reckless speed, praying to the depths of me that we don’t meet any more priests – any more barreirs –

Cora’s eyes flash open and I glance at her. “I’m serious, Ella,” she pants, pressing a hand to her back where she’s bleeding. “It was a – a glancing stab. I don’t think he hit anything too

important – It would” she gasps when I hit a bump and I grimace when I see the pain flash across her face, see her go white with it.

“Keep going, Cora!” I encourage, my eyes moving fast between her and the road. “Tell

me!”

“I’d be in more pain,” she gasps, “if he’d hit a kidney. I think I think it will be okay, Ella – but I have to get to a hospital, now -”

“No we don’t,” I growl, whipping the car to the side and making Cora gasp as we pull to the road’s shoulder.

“Ella, we have to go!” she screams, there could be more of them!”

“No!” I shout, slamming the car into park and then taking panting breaths as I close my eyes. Cora goes quiet as she realizes what I’m doing, but even though I can reach that lavender state – even though I can sense my gift when I reach for it, it...

It slips out of my hands.

“Cora,” I cry in agony, my eyes flying open. “The Priest 1 he did something to me – he bound my wolf, I can’t reach the gift.”

“It’s okay,” she says, leaning forward to grasp my shoulder and gasping with the pain it causes her. I shake my head at my sister, fear and apology all over my face. “Seriously, Ella,” she says, panting a little, “it’s fine. Just – let’s get back on the road, okay? I need medical attention. And if you can’t get it, we have to go somewhere else.”

“Okay,” I say, gritting my teeth, determined. And then I get us back on the road as fast as I can. Soon, the wind whipping through the broken windows begins to howl around us. “Okay, Cora. I’ll get you there. I’ll take you to the hospital as fast as I can.”

“No,” she gasps, gritting her teeth and closing her eyes. “Take me to Hank – he will know what to do. We have to go see Hank.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding anxiously. We’ll go to Hank. Right now. He will fix you up.”

I turn towards the road with renewed conviction as my sister gasps beside me, as my baby cries in the back seat. And then, before I lose myself to the

road, I reach beneath me to grab Henry’s phone, which must have fallen out of Cora’s pocket.

“Here,” I say as it bounces in her lap, making her open her eyes. “If you can, Cora – text Sinclair. Tell him what happened.”

And as I concentrate on the road, Cora reaches for the phone.

Chapter 368 – Deeper In

Sinclair

“We have to get to them,” Roger snarls, moving towards a window intending to bash it to pieces, I know – but I grab his arm as he goes, pulling him back.

“The priests are not that stupid,

Roger,” I say through clenched teeth. ” If they can make the door disappear, they can make the windows solid – ”

“So what do we do,” Roger growls, frantic, as our remaining healthy men take advantage of the momentary reprieve to attend to the men who are wounded. I glance around, doing a quick survey and finding that about eight of our men are down. I grimace when I realize that two are not moving at all, or making any noise. But I look away from them fast, not needing the distraction.

“We retreat, I say, holding Roger’s eye, “or we move further in. But there’s a reason why they’re not attacking here – they’re letting us stay in relative peace because they want us to stay here. Which means they don’t want us to leave, and they don’t want us to go further.”

“What?” Roger asks, frantic and a little baffled, looking around. “Why don’t they just kill us? Why don’t they just -”

“Because they can’t,” I say, nodding as I figure it out. If they had more priests to send – enough to take us out – they would do it. But the fact that they’re not sending them...

It means that we’ve got enough force on us that they can’t risk it. That we, somehow, outnumber or outmatch them. My wolf bares his fangs within me, eager now, on more secure ground now that we know more about what we’re facing.

“What?” Roger asks, his brows knitting together, still looking frantically for a way to get out, to get to her to his mate-

“Roger!” I shout, shaking his arm, making him turn to me. “If you think I have any less concern for Ella than you do Cora, then you need to check

yourself,” I hiss, bringing my face close to his so that only he hears me. “But you need to pull it together. You’re not going to help them by acting on impulse, all right? We need a plan.”

Roger glances away again for just a second, his jaw clenched, but then he turns back to me and nods so I release his arm.

“Which way?” I ask, crossing my arms and glancing up towards the staircase and the second level where I suspect more are waiting for us, guarding.... something. Perhaps their Master?

Perhaps...something else? “They want us to stay here, but they can’t hold us forever. So the only question is – do we fight to leave? Or to go further in?”

I see the word “leave” on Roger’s tongue, can see Cora on his mind. And frankly, I’m tempted too. The idea that – well, that they want us to stay here means that they knew we were coming. And if they knew that we were coming...

It means that they know far more about us than we thought they did. That they know that the girls are alone now. Even

Even the location of the bunker. I groan inwardly at the possibility, but I force myself to turn away from it, to focus again on my brother.

Roger, to my surprise, hesitates, glancing up the stairs with me, putting the pieces together. “If they aren’t sending more,” he murmurs, meeting my eyes, “it means we’re close.”

“Push?” I ask, steeling myself for his answer.

Slowly, Roger nods his head. “We push.”

I turn to my men, giving a loud order to assemble where possible. Those who are able again line up before us, two of our healthy men falling back – as is part of their protocol – to continue tending to our wounded. I give brisk orders for the men to press forward no matter what. The men nod, steeled for what’s going to come next.

Then, as one, Roger and I turn towards the stairs, determined to continue the attack.

The problem presents itself immediately as we start to climb, considering that there is a blank wall at the top of the stairs instead of a hallway or a door through which we can pass. When I get to the top, I press a hand against the barrier, which feels as real as any other wall I’ve ever touched.

Roger brings his face close, sniffing it. “It’s off,” he murmurs. “Something... wrong here.”

“Magic,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and looking it up and down. “Conjured.”

Roger leans back and thinks for a moment before he speaks again, his voice low and considering. “We know, from our research, that the priest’s power comes from binding

their wolves. Which means that...whatever they've accessed to create this kind of illusion...we have access to it too, Dominic."

"What do you mean?" I ask, turning to him, confused.

"I mean," he says, looking at me askance. "That...I mean, we forget it –

or we think that only Cora and Ella have it, but our wolves too are gifts from the goddess. They're magic, as much as we don't generally describe them that way. That the priests are able to do this because they've denied that gift, darkened it."

I nod, turning back to the wall, considering it. "So," I say slowly, "we can conclude that... we have the tools we need to fight this."

"I think so," Roger says, turning his head and considering again. And then he reaches out and takes my hand.

"What?" I snap, jerking my hand away from his.

"Don't be an idiot Dominic," Roger grumbles, rolling his eyes at me and then grabbing my hand again. "I'm trying to...do something here."

And then, as I watch, I see Roger begin to...well, meditate. Or, at least that's the closest thing I can think of to describe it it's certainly looks like what Ella does when she begins to access her gift. And then as I watch him, I feel a little...tug. Inside of me, where my wolf lives. And my wolf cocks his head to the side as if he has heard a strange noise. Curious, he moves towards it, and I urge him to go further.

And then, quite suddenly, I...feel Roger's wolf, there beside mine. And, acting on some impulse, I close my eyes too, willing myself to calm, to relax. And though I can't see it – can only feel it – I know that our wolves, together, their magic joined together...they press forward.

And as they do, I raise my hand to touch my fingers against the wall, and I too press.

At first my fingers simply push against the solid wall, but as our wolves move together, the wall beneath my fingers seems to give – not crumble, or bend, as a wall might, but instead to move inward until.

I almost stumble forward, catching myself at the last minute as there's suddenly nothing beneath my hand. My eyes fall open to see nothing there before us – and I turn my eyes to Roger in shock –

But I snap my face back forward when I see the snarl on his lips – as I realize that the

priest – the priest –

He's standing right before us, his fists wrapped in flames.

"Clever wolves," he murmurs, his mouth lifting in a sneer. "Calling my bluff."

Roger doesn't bother to reply, instead transforming instantly into his wolf and leaping forward, his fangs ready for blood. I roar and signal my men forward for a charge before we all move directly for the priest who stands alone before us.

Chapter 369 – Dr. Hank

Ella

I stumble through the doors of the clinic with immense difficulty, Cora leaning heavily and moaning on my one side, Rafe's carrier bouncing against my other.

People's eyes go wide when they see us, but they quickly scatter out of our way to make room, shouting for nurses and doctors to come and help. I hold my breath, my eyes fastened on the clinic's familiar front counter as I pray to heaven and back that Hank is here, that he's on duty tonight.

I exhale a that huge breath in a sob of relief when I see him come, wide-eyed, around the corner, trying to figure out what the big fuss is about. Hank gasps when he sees us, dropping his clipboard and dashing into the waiting room to get to our side.

To my immense relief, Hank recovers quickly from his surprise and is, quite suddenly, the calm and efficient surgeon I've come to know and trust.

"What's wrong," he snaps as he gets his shoulder under Cora's other arm. Where is she hurt?"

"Her lower back," I say, my words coming slowly as I try to get my frantic mind in order. "She was stabbed – we were attacked, Hank – I'm so sorry –"

"Enough," he says harshly, dismissing my apology with a glare as he helps me basically carry Cora into the back, to where we can help her. "A stab wound?! Why the fuck didn't you get her to a hospital, Ella!"

"It's not bad," Cora mumbles, and Hank's head snaps up, as if he didn't really realize that she's conscious enough to talk.

"Tell me." he says, guiding us all into the first room. Then, as Cora talks to him in some kind of medical jargon I don't understand, Hank and I help her up onto an examination table where she lays on her belly. Hank hisses when he sees the amount of blood soaking her shirt and her pants.

I take a step back, holding on to Rafe's carrier tightly in both of my hands, finally taking a moment to glance down at my son. He's fussing unhappily, wanting to be held and comforted, but I'm so, so grateful to see that he's essentially unharmed. My whole heart breaks as I watch him cry – but I resist, knowing that – that Hank might need me to help that Rafe just has to wait –

I turn my eyes back to Cora then, watching as Hank pulls on latex gloves and then begins to peel back her clothing so that he can see the wound. I see him take a deep

breath at first and then slowly breathe it out as he quickly begins to work.

My eyes flick to Cora as nurses come into the room, ready to spring into action. Hank gives them quick demands before glancing to me.

“She was right,” Hank calmly informs me. “It’s not it’s not fatal, Ella,” he says, turning back to his work. “I mean, it’s critical – we have to do some work but it’s a relatively shallow stab, and the knife missed her major organs – ”

“Hank,” I say, breathless with worry as I glance between my sister – her eyes closed as she lays on the table, faintly breathing – and the doctor I know can save her life. The doctor whose heart she broke so little time ago. “Hank,” I continue, shaking my head, “she’s – she’s pregnant.”

Hank goes perfectly still and pale as he takes in my words, and I can almost see the thoughts passing through his head Cora, pregnant Roger she left him for she’s human humans can’t get pregnant by a wolf –

His eyes dart back to her as I see him come to the logical conclusion, the same one Cora did –

But I’m at his side at an instant, my hand on his arm. “Hank,” I say again, drawing his attention back to me as I shake my head, “Roger father.” Roger is the

He frowns at me, confused – “That’s impossible, Ella —“

Slowly I shake my head, willing him to believe me. “We have no explanation,” I say, holding his gaze. “But Roger sensed it the baby, it’s his blood – ” –

Hank takes another deep breath and roughly scrapes his palm down over his face, putting the thoughts together. Then he turns away from me, barking something out to the nurses about getting an ultrasound machine in here right away.

He turns back to me. “Do you know how far along she is?” he asks, stern, and I see him tucking his emotions about the news away, hiding behind his professional identity alone.

“No,” I say, shaking my head, “um, not long? Maybe – maybe a week after her missed period?” I shrug, confused, “I don’t know?”

He nods, satisfied. “With a wolf pregnancy...” but then he turns to me again, confused, “wait, is it even a wolf pregnancy?”

I just shrug and shake my head – honestly, we don’t know. Hank sighs and stares at her, at my sister who I think maybe has slipped into a daze as the nurses continue to prep

her.

“If it was a wolf pregnancy,” Hank says, folding his arms, “then it would be long enough, now, to detect a heartbeat. But if the baby is...human? I don’t know, Ella.” Then he turns to me. “Either way,” he says, “the knife wouldn’t have itself harmed the child. But her blood loss...”

He sighs again, shaking his head. “I’ll do everything I can.”

“Thank you,” I breathe, taking one hand from Rafe’s carrier to quickly wrap an arm around Hank’s shoulders, giving him a little squeeze. Then, knowing Hank’s not a very huggy kind of guy, I step away, moving to a chair against the wall so that he can get to work.

Hank nods to me, understanding, and then ignores me for a long time. I watch everything as Hank and his nurses work quickly but methodically to do what they can for Cora. I only take my eyes away to lift poor Rafe out of his carrier, to begin to feed him a little, hoping that the warmth of me and the comfort of nourishment will calm him down. And, frankly, because the familiarity of the routine will calm me as well.

When he’s finished, Rafe burps a little and then falls calmly asleep in my arms, which I’m grateful for. Because as much as I love my baby, I can’t...I can’t truly attend to him with all of the love I want to give while I’m so worried about my sister.

At some point, a very kind nurse comes to me and asks me if I need anything. Remembering Henry’s instructions not to use his phone to tell the boys where we are – and suddenly very, very struck with worry about Henry, and feeling terribly guilty that I haven’t remembered him until now – I ask her for a phone – any phone.

Grateful to be able to help, the nurse slips her own phone out of her back pocket and hands it to me. Quickly, I type Sinclair’s number into the message box and send a quick text.

It’s Ella. Cora’s hurt, but she’ll be okay. Rafe is okay. We’re at the Clinic – I couldn’t help her. They bound my wolf and my gift when we tried to leave. Hank is working. Come when you can – go to your father first. I have no idea if he is okay. Love you.

“Thank you,” I say, handing the phone back to the nurse, smiling at her as much as I can. “Do you need me to tell you if there’s a reply?” she asks, still eager to do something, anything.

“There won’t be,” I murmur, turning my eyes back to my sister. The nurse nods and goes away. She comes back a little later with some wet wipes and a blanket, and I just blink at the wipes for a second before laughing as I realize –

As I realize that I'm covered in blood. I laugh a little at the absurdity of it before thanking her and taking a moment to wipe off the blood that I can from my face and arms. Then, I wrap the blanket around my baby and myself, settling back in my chair to wait.

Because that's all I can do now. Wait. While Hank does what he can to save my sister's life, as well as her child's.

Chapter 370 – Unleashing the Flame

Ella

I fall into a little daze as I watch Hank work, as I hold my sleeping baby in my arms. It's not that I'm not paying attention – it's just that...I don't really understand what they're doing or saying, so to me it's all just quiet repetitive work.

I do pay attention, of course, when Hank deems Cora patched up enough to roll her over onto her side so that they can perform an ultrasound. Cora gives a low moan when the nurses move her, a sound which at once pains me and gives me a little thrill of hope. Because as much as I hate to hear my sister in pain –

Damn it, at least it means she's alive. I watch carefully as the nurses hold her still, as Hank expertly spreads some clear jelly on her stomach and then begins to search for a heartbeat. Then I bury my head in my hand a few moments later when he finds it – a fast, faint fluttering of noise. My little niece or nephew, still fighting for life.

I drag my hand away from my face a moment later to see Hank nodding to his nurses and Cora lowered back on her belly. Then, Hank turns to me, pulling off his gloves as he crosses the room and falls into a crouch so that we can be almost face-to-face while I stay seated.

"You saw?" he asks, looking up at me a little from his lowered place on the floor. "Yes," I reply, nodding sharply. "The baby is alive, but – "

"Right," he says, glancing back towards Cora. "It's – it's not preferable, obviously, for a mother to be so gravely wounded so early in a pregnancy. Frequently the body will decide..." he sighs and shakes his head, trying to come up with the right words. He looks up at me as he finishes his thought, "the body will sometimes decide, Ella, to prioritize the mother."

"So miscarriage..." I say, looking over at my sister.

"There's a higher risk of it right now, yes. Ella," he says again, his voice curious now, drawing my eyes back to him. "Did Cora ever mention to you the possibility..."

"Yes," I say, nodding, knowing where he's going with this. "I can do it, Hank but, the people who hurt us in the woods – "I shake my head, realizing that he's not going to understand what I'm talking about if I start babbling on about priests in dark robes and the God of Darkness. "As we were getting away they they bound my gift and my wolf," I say, giving a little shrug. "T tried to heal her in the car, but I couldn't access the gift."

"Really," Hank says, his eyebrows going up in surprise. "So you can – you can actually like, use it to heal people – to heal wounds like that -"

I narrow my eyes at Hank suddenly, a little disturbed by his curiosity about the gift when we should be concentrating on helping my sister. What, really, is he asking me here?

“Sorry,” Hank says, putting his hands up in a little plea for forgiveness. “I’m I’m just a doctor, Ella. It’s all I really do, try to fix bodies. The idea of being able to wield medicine like that – it’s a dream. But please forgive my professional distraction.”

I let out a little sigh and nod, my eyes moving back to Cora, wanting to move on from it.

“Well,” Hank says, standing up to his feet and looking at Cora himself. “It would help Cora, and the baby, a lot, if you were able to...I don’t know, Ella, unbind the gift? I know a lot about wolf biology, but not a lot about the religion or the magic of it all. Is there anyway to get around this? Perhaps one of the priestesses of the Goddess, your mother? Could they help you get...in touch with her? Ask for her aid or something?”

My eyes flash to him suddenly as I realize that – that Hank may have stumbled on something here.

“That’s...a really good idea, Hank,” I say, getting quickly to my feet and looking around the room. “Can I use a phone, please?”

He nods to the computer and the phone in the corner of the room. “Of course, Ella,” he says. “The entire facility is at your disposal.” He glances back towards Cora now. “I’m going to run some tests,” he murmurs, taking a deep breath and steeling himself. “Let’s update each other, if we have news?”

I nod eagerly to Hank and then carry Rafe over to the little computer in the corner, where I open a web browser and begin to search for the contact information of the temple in the center of our city, hoping to hell the priestesses there can do something to help.

Sinclair

The priest before us sweeps a fist out in front of him, his teeth bared in determination as he sends a sheet of flame racing towards us. Roger, in mid-leap, takes the hit first, yelping and turning away as the fire burns him, singeing the edges of his fur but burning out before it gets deep enough to actually hurt his flesh.

I crouch defensively, my roar of attack turning into one of pain as I turn my back to the fire but feel it curling at my clothes, my skin, the back of my neck – a deep and searing touch that’s gone after an instant as the wave passes me.

Then, cringing at the sound of my men behind me likewise taking the brunt of the flame, I turn back to the priest and stand again, coming back to Roger’s side.

"I'll do it again," the priest says, his teeth gritted as he glares at us. "I will burn you until your charred skeletons are all that are left -"

"You won't," I snap, taking another step towards him. "Or else you'd have done it by now."

Something flashes in the Priest's eye – frustration, I think, in being caught out. Roger, understanding my point, bares his teeth and begins to prowl forward now.

"You're weakening," I say, considering the priest carefully as we advance and he takes slow steps backwards away from us. "I don't know why," I continue, my shoulders hunching now as I prepare my attack. "Maybe you burned out your energy on that illusion below – maybe your magic was amplified by your connection to the other priests. They're all dead, by the way."

I watch carefully when I see the priest flinch at this information, wondering at the effect. "It doesn't matter," the priest snarls. "I will take you out, and your men will fall without their leader -"

Slowly, I just shake my head. "No. They fight for more than me," I say, my hands itching to turn into claws now, my teeth aching to be fangs. But I hold back, wanting to keep him talking wanting to get whatever information I can. "Even if I died, they'd take you to defend their Luna. To defend their future King."

The priest begins to laugh now, a dirty, hysterical thing. "Wasted," he says, the words ripping victoriously from his teeth. "Your Luna is dead now, Alpha," he says, "as is yours, and your pathetic little mutt with her," he laughs, turning to Roger now.

Roger loses it then, crouching to leap, but I grab him by the scruff before he can. Because, while the priest's words make me want to tear him to pieces as well, we still need more. We need to know about his master.

"And what will happen to you," I say slowly as Roger winds himself back in. "When you are dead. Who will mourn you? This master to whom you've sold your life?"

"The Master is nothing anymore," the Priest says, his back almost literally against a wall now, and realizing that he's out of space, he crouches and begins to prepare again, the fires that have never left his hands burning harder, hotter now. "The Master is gone now = he has his boy, and so our service to him is done. If I die today, it is the will of the Dark God. And I," he says slowly now, his face lit from beneath by the light of his flames, "I will relish his gift of death."

And then, with a scream that tears through the hall and makes all of us flinch, the priest

unleashes his flames, burning himself out and willing himself to take all of us with him.

Roger roars, leaping directly for the fire that threatens to consume us all – But I beat him to it, my wolf taking over my body and surging in front of him in front of all my men brunt of the flame.

Chapter 371 – Holy Water

Ella

Rafe and I are standing behind the counter, staring at the front door of the clinic, waiting for the Priestess to arrive. I shift anxiously from foot to foot and Rafe grumbles and cries anxiously in my arms, probably picking up on my emotions.

"It's okay, little baby," I murmur, tearing my eyes away for a second to glance down at him. I smile a little at his unhappy little face, unable to help the little surge of love that pulses through me. "We're going to get you home real soon," I promise in a whisper, "wrap you up in a nice warm blanket. Sing you to sleep. And everything will be...fine."

Rafe calms a little as I do and I let out a deep breath, looking back at the door, hoping to hell that I didn't just lie to him.

Because all I want, in the whole world, is for this all to be over- I hear the door click and then I stop breathing as it pushes open. Then, I can't help my little happy cry as the priestess comes in the door, a little basket slung over the crook of her arm.

"Oh thank god!" I shout, running for her and throwing my arm around her, careful to hold Rafe to the side even as I pull her tight.

"Oh!" she says, clearly surprised by my tiny assault. Then, she laughs a little. "Well, perhaps thank Goddess might be more accurate in this situation," she says neatly, pulling away from me.

I smile at her so, so grateful that – she's here. "Yes, sorry about that – I don't mean to be rude. I'm just so happy you came!"

"Of course, Luna!" she says, lifting a gentle hand to my cheek and smiling warmly at me. "We are always happy to help." Then she pauses, looking anxiously around the room at all of the people staring at us. "Is there... somewhere we could go? For greater privacy?"

And I realize that – especially to the humans in the room – that we might be making a bit of a spectacle. After all, it's not every day that you see a woman with dried blood flaking off her clothes hugging a robed priestess.

"Oh, sure!" I say, grabbing her by the hand and tugging her with me to the exam rooms in the back. Luckily, we run almost immediately into Hank, who is coming out of Cora's room.

"Hank!" I say, giving him an excited smile. "This is one of my mother's priestesses – she performed Rafe's baptism." I wait impatiently while Hank nods to the priestess and mumbles a greeting. She says something polite back before I can continue. "Is there

somewhere we can go?" I ask him. "Where she can help me unbind the gift?"

"Sure," Hank says, his eyebrows going up in interest. Then he pushes the door to the room next to Cora's open. "Do you...need anything?" he asks, looking the priestess up and down with wary eyes.

I think that's a little strange, frankly, but I ignore it in my eagerness to get this done. The priestess sounded pretty eager on the phone – like she really thought she could help. If this works, I could actually help Cora – get her patched up soon, make sure the baby is safe-

"I think we'll be all right," the priestess says smoothly in response. Privacy," she adds with a little shrug, might actually be best.

"Of course," Hank murmurs, taking a step back and watching us carefully as we go into the room. The priestess gives him a kind smile before shutting the door behind her. Then, she locks it.

"So, do you really think you can help?" I ask eagerly, bouncing Rafe a little in my arms in my excitement.

"Well," she says, turning to the little steel exam table and placing her basket on it. "It's obviously not something we do every day," she says, giving a little laugh. "But we've worked, before, with people whose wolves are tangled. The Goddess finds a way to..." she hesitates, searching for a way to describe it.

"Unbind? Or, maybe unwind?" She laughs a little again in a self-deprecating sort of way. "Apologies, Luna, I don't have the right words for it. But, the Goddess' powers are a mystery to us all."

"I'll say," I murmur, looking closely at the supplies that she has brought, which mostly look like clear jugs of water. "What's what's all this?"

"It's holy water," she says, taking the last sealed jug out and placing it on the table before tucking the basket away below. "From the spring where we baptized your child. It provides a greater connection to the Goddess."

"Oh," I say, my eyes going wide. Then, I nod, not really getting it but willing to play along. "Okay. What...what do we do?"

"Well," she says, turning to me. "It would be better if we had...a kind of tub? Or a pool, or a spring?"

I grimace a little and shake my head. "I don't think we have anything like that here, or at

least not easily." On the phone the Priestess had asked if I could come to the temple, but I had been unwilling to leave Cora if at all possible. So the Priestess had said it was all right, we could probably make do here.

Luckily, she keeps the same sort of spirit even now, when I again tell her we can't accommodate what she needs.

"That's all right," she says, taking up one of the jars and smiling at me. We'll just have to get a little messy, yes?" She glances over her shoulder at the door. "You don't think your doctor friend will mind, do you? Or... interrupt?"

"No," I say, speaking honestly. "Hank will understand."

"Okay," she says, taking a deep breath. "We need to saturate you, Luna, as best we can in the water. And then, once that is done, we will evoke the Goddess and do our best to ask her to unbind you."

"Okay," I say. "Um...should I sit on the floor?"

"Probably," she says with a shrug. "That way you can...well, be soaked, and perhaps sit in a little pool of the water

." she laughs again then, shaking her head at me. "I'm sorry, Luna – it's all much more dignified when we do this sort of work in the temple and we can ask our patients to submerge themselves in a sacred pool. But I promise, it has a very high rate of effectiveness.'

"It's okay," I say, feeling more cheerful and laughing at myself a little bit too. I begin to settle myself down on the floor, but the priestess hesitates a little.

"Actually," she says, "it would probably be best if you did not have the child in your arms. He, I believe, is... unbound? As far as we know?"

"Oh!" I say, surprised and hesitant now. Yes, Rafe is unharmed but...well, I haven't taken my hands or my eyes off of him since we got to the clinic. And frankly, I'd prefer not to now. But...I also see where the priestess's point.

If this ceremony is about unbinding me, perhaps his energy will interfere. I bite my lip a little, looking down at my baby boy.

"Give him to me," the priestess says quietly. "I'll take good care of him, Luna. As I did at his baptism. As I have promised to do all of his life."

"O-okay," I say, sighing a little and shifting my little baby over to the priestess' arms

before sighing and settling myself unhappily on the floor. I wish, quite suddenly and quite desperately, that Sinclair were here. Not only because that would mean I had him safe by my side, but also so that...well, so that Rafe would have his father to hold him while I do this.

Rafe cries a little in the Priestess' unfamiliar arms as she takes the lids off of each of the jars of water and then begins to move around me in a circle, chanting softly as she pours the water on each of my sides and then over my body and head until I am, indeed,

soaked in it. I gasp a little as the last drop flows down my face. By this time, Rafe is crying quite hard and I frown as I look towards him, wanting him back. Wanting to comfort him.

I shiver a little as I deny myself the desire to hold my baby again. Sacred pool or not, the result of being drenched is indeed that I am sitting in a rather large puddle of holy water. And even if it is holy...well, it's cold. The Priestess comes to stand in front of me now, lifting her free hand and beginning to chant again.

But before she can really begin, both of us turn towards the door when we hear the handle shake, and then, a moment later, we hear the lock turn. We're both quiet as the door slowly opens and Hank quietly enters the room, leaving the door open behind him.

"Everything okay in here?" he asks, frowning at me when he sees me soaked on the floor. "Ella, what are you doing?"

"It's part of a ceremony, Hank," I sigh, a little exasperated. "Yes," the priestess snaps, frowning at him. "It would be better if we were left alone."

"Oh," he says, quietly looking her up and down, an odd look on his face." Actually," he says, cocking his head to the side as he takes in Rafe's loud cries. "I wonder if I can help. Here," he continues, taking a slow step towards here. "Clearly, your hands are full. Let me...hold the baby."

And the priestess frowns and narrows her eyes at Hank as he holds out his hands, beckoning, reaching for Rafe." Give the child to me."

Chapter 372 – Burn Out

Roger

Less time probably passes than it feels like. Because it feels like hours of being seared by fire, of the Priest hurling spells at us.

And it's not fire alone – it's flames first, and then slicing spells that cut at us, and then wind – and ice – and something that feels like acid in the air that creeps into our lungs and makes us hack –

But slowly, slowly he burns himself out. And our men fall, screaming. But in the end, it's me who prowls towards him in my wolf's body, ignoring the aches and pains that come with every step. It's me.

I step over my brother's limp form, doing my best to ignore the fact that what breaths pulse from Dominic's lips are short and shallow. That his eyes are shut, that whole swathes of his skin are burned away.

I only have eyes for him, this cornered Priest, at the end of this. Because it is the end. And I have him trapped.

Then, because I want him to see me in a form he can understand, I shift back into my human body, wincing as I do so, as the pains of my flesh reform themselves on hands instead of paws, on my legs instead of my haunches.

"Tell me" I command, as I stand before him, cowered in his corner.

"I will tell you noth-"

But I roar, allowing my nails to arc into claws that I slash across his face, opening four deep wounds across his cheeks, his nose, his lips. He shrieks in pain and covers his face before looking up at me.

"You will tell me," I continue, crouching down in front of him, unblinking in my determination and my fury. "Because while you may be prepared to die for your god," I say, holding up my hands so he can see my weapons there, "I don't think that your little order prepared you for days, weeks, or months of torture. Little priest."

And his eyes shift then to focus on my claws as the blood drips down his face. As he realizes what I'm saying. That he is going to die But when?

That's up to me.

"Tell me," I say again, gentler this time.

“I already did,” the priest grinds out, finding a little more courage and hate in himself as he snarls the words at me, as he winces at the feel of his face shifting when he speaks, at the new pain there. “I told you the master is gone-”

Quickly, before he can see me move, I rip my claws again over his face – raking some in the fresh wounds I just placed there, but also opening some new ones for good measure.

He screams, then, at the pain of it, his hands flying to cover his wounds. But I slash at those next, letting my claws cut deep, severing several fingers and slicing deep into the tendons of his hand so that they are useless to him now – for the rest of his short life.

The Priest screams again, falling flat to the floor next to the curled forms of his sliced fingers, staring up at his mangled hands.

“TELL ME!” I roar, leaning over him now, “Or by your God’s own name I will do it AGAIN! And I will keep doing it until you are nothing but SHREDS OF WHAT YOU ONCE WERE!”

The priest trembles as he looks up at me, in so much pain now that I don’t know if his words are shaking in shock or fear or...something else. But I have every reason to believe they’re honest. He no longer has any reason to lie.

“He’s gone, he has the child – ”

“Where,” I command, but the priest cries out in fear now, working to cover his face again but only succeeding in leaking blood all over himself.

“I don’t know!” he cries. “He didn’t tell us!”

“What does he have!?” I command, shoving the priest’s hands away from his face so that I can look down on him again. “More priests? More defenses!?”

“Nothing,” he moans, shaking his head. “We were – we were the last we were supposed to hold you here – “he grits his teeth now, finding some level of frustration in this, almost not believing that we found a way to defy his spells. “I don’t know how you got through it -”

But I don’t let him finish – because frankly, I don’t care. Instead, I raise a fist to shoulder height and then smash it, again and again, into the Priest’s clenched teeth, reducing his face to a bloody, gurling pulp.

And then, to make sure the job is done, I use my claws to cut his throat, watching as the

blood flows quick. And then, as his hands fall limp at his side, I open the veins at his wrists to hasten his death.

I want to spend no more time with this wretch of a man, who dedicated his life to darkness. For what? For the chance to wield some spells? To feel, for a moment, that he was powerful in stealing a helpless child?

Disgusted, I turn back to the hall filled with our men. And I can tell the moment that the priest dies. Because there is an almost audible click as the magic leaves the house. I don't know what it was – wards to tell him where we were? Further protections? It doesn't matter. But I know, instantly, that everything is gone. That it is now, again...just a house.

At the end of the hall, a form staggers to his feet and I recognize Conor as he moves towards me.

“Sir,” he says, limping a little and holding his left arm close to his body. “Orders?”

I nod to him, a surge of gratitude pulsing through me for such a dedicated soldier, who wants to complete the mission even while he's hurt. “Sweep the rooms,” I command, my eyes already moving to Dominic, my true priority here. “The priest claimed his master was gone. We need to ensure that it's true. Take...whoever you can,” I say, moving to Dominic as I finish giving the order.

“Yes, Sir,” Conor replies, doing his best to salute and then moving towards the handful of men who I can see getting to their feet. I notice, passively, that it's... a much smaller number than I would have hoped.

But I don't have time for that now. Instead, I kneel over Dominic, who is laying on his side. When I push at his shoulder and turn him onto his back, Dominic gives a heavy groan. I grimace to see that his face has been sliced and burned – so badly that...god, it hurts even to look at him.

“Dominic,” I murmur, leaning close, wanting – desperately – for him to respond. “Dominic – come on -”

And, to my immense relief, his eyes flutter open.

“Ella,” he mutters, working to sit up, and I roll my eyes a little because – I mean, honestly, all I'm thinking about right now is Cora too, but obviously I can't get Dominic to Ella until we assess how badly he's hurt. I make a soothing noise and press against his shoulder, obliging him to lay back against the floor.

“Easy,” I murmur. “Let me check you out, all right?”

Dominic, coming back to himself a little, nods, and then groans as it hurts him somehow. I begin my routine survey of his wounds, checking for the worst, the battlefield medic training we all go through kicking in.

But even with my limited training, I can tell that...it's bad.

It's really, really bad.

Chapter 373 – Betrayer

Roger

“My phone,” Dominic murmurs as I look over his wounds. “Fuck your phone,” I murmur, shaking my head and leaning closer to a deep slice on his stomach that makes me hiss with anxiety.

“Roger,” Dominic snaps, and I look up at him with a frown. “The priest – he said the master had Rafe. Check my fucking phone – Ella will...” his head. I falls back, exhausted. But I interpret his meaning. So, I reach for his back pocket. Dominic moans loudly as I turn him a little so that I can get behind him, but eventually I get the phone and flick through it, my face going pale at what I see.

“Shit,” I murmur, flipping through the messages first from our father’s phone and then an unfamiliar number.

“What?” he asks.

“They don’t have Rafe,” I sigh, tucking the phone into my own back pocket. “The priest was wrong about that. The baby’s still with Ella and Cora. But...” I sigh, and Dominic opens his eyes to look at me, bidding me silently to tell him everything I know. “They attacked the bunker when we left. The girls got out through the passage – they had to leave dad behind. And...Cora’s hurt,” I say, working hard to get the words out steadily. “They went to Hank, to try to patch them up.”

Dominic’s eyes go wide now. “Ella’s gift?”

“Bound,” I say, shaking my head. “I don’t know how-”

“Doesn’t matter,” my brother murmurs, and then to my shock – he curls his body to sit up, almost screaming at the pain it causes him.

“Dominic!” I shout, putting my hands on his shoulders, but he works to swat me away, so I back off.

“We have to get to them,” Dominic says, panting and holding my eyes. We can’t – we can’t trust Hank...”

Slowly, I hold his eyes and shake my head. “Let me go, Dominic,” I say, shaking my head. “You’re in,” I hesitate, but when I look at the blood seeping from his wounds I know that I’m right. “You’re in bad shape.”

He just glares at me and I sigh, knowing it’s a lost cause.

“Fine,” I say, giving a little shrug and working to put my arm beneath my brother’s shoulder to help him up. “But if you fall to pieces on the way, don’t blame me.”

Dominic mutters something in response as we get him panting to his feet, but I ignore it, seeing Conor coming close.

“Nothing, Sir,” Conor reports, looking anxiously towards my brother. “No one else here. If the man – Xander if he was here, he’s not anymore. What can I

“Nothing,” I snap. But then I rethink the command. “Actually – get the cars close. We need transport, now. You take all the men – injured and healthy – back to the bunker. They were attacked when we were gone – they’ll need reinforcements. Dominic and I...”

“The Lunas,” Conor says, giving us a quick salute. “I understand.”

And then, his face serious, Conor turns and starts to give commands to the men. “That one needs a promotion,” I murmur to my brother.

“Later,” Dominic sighs, his eyes on the stairs. “Right now, let’s just figure out how the hell we’re getting me out of this house.”

Ella

My eyes dart to Hank, going immediately wide. And suddenly, Henry’s ideas echo in my mind. That we can’t trust Hank. That he’s gotten too close to our family too quickly. That he’s an ambitious, eager man who has worked suspiciously hard to work to a place of trust with our inner circle.

And then, today – why was he asking so much about my gift and how I could use it? Did he really really want to help Cora and her baby? Or was there something else...

“Don’t!” I gasp, throwing a hand out towards the Priestess, Rafe still crying loudly in one of her arms while she holds one of the empty jugs of holy water with her other hand.

“Don’t give him the baby!”

Hank turns to me then, shocked and confused. “What?” he asks.

“Don’t do it!” I say, ignoring him, my eyes completely focused on the Priestess before me. “Don’t trust him – please! Just – ”

But then, I go pale as Rafe begins to scream in her arms – a noise beyond the normal cries of a disgruntled baby who wants his mother. A very true, very desperate scream –

As if –

As if Rafe himself intuits something about her –

That's something is wrong –

My face goes slack with horror as I shift my eyes away from my baby and back to the Priestess who holds him, as I see now the vicious sneer on her face as she whips up the hand which is not holding Rafe and cracks the jug still held in her fingers hard across Hank's skull.

Hank gives a horrible cry of pain and then falls to the ground, his hands immediately going to his head –

I begin to leap to my feet, heading immediately for the priestess, but she whirls on me next, throwing out a hand towards me and growling some words that have no meaning to me –

But even if I don't understand them, their effects are immediately clear as the water that surrounds me instantly freezes.

I scream, the cold of the ice burning my skin where it touches, pinning me in place, binding me to the floor. I shove my arms against it but – somehow – it's not natural ice. Instead, every time I break it, it re-freezes, holding me ever steady in my place in the center of the room as the Priestess lets out a dark laugh.

"No!" I scream, trying to reach for my baby, but my arms can't move at all. Hank moans on the ground beside me, but I see his feet move- working to get up – see him

The Priestess turns to him, her face turning wicked now, and she delivers a sharp kick first to his ribs – taking his breath and then to my horror to his head making his moan deepen and 1 his body go slack –

"Thank you," the Priestess says, turning back to me with a nasty smile. "

For making this so easy for me. For bidding me come help you once you were separated from that idiot Alpha you call your mate. For telling me precisely where you are, instead of having to hunt you down. The Master will be...quite pleased with me, that I was able to complete the job even when you weaseled out of his first and second traps."

I'm still screaming at her to let me go, to give me back my child, telling her that I'll kill her – and then, desperate, that I'll give her whatever she wants.

She ignores me though. And, as I watch, the Priestess raises one hand over her head and snaps her fingers. A darkness descends over her then as her robes shift in color

from dove to a dark and turbulent grey. And I know, instantly, that she's one of them.

One of his.

"So good to be back in my true form," she murmurs, shaking herself a little in relief. Then she smirks at me. "And so good to finally be able to get away from those goody-goods who worship your idiot mother."

Then, taunting me, she comes close to grin down into my face, my baby screaming in her arms. "So good to again serve a real God. He will reward me much when he sees that it is me who has brought the Master his boy. The Master," she says, her voice hardly more than a whisper now – hardly audible over Rafe's screams, "always gets what he wants,"

And then she laughs, turning away from me, as I scream after her completely desperate, but totally unable to move. And she takes my baby away.

Chapter 374 – Frozen

Ella

I scream at the top of my lungs – no words, just senseless agony – the moment the woman turns the corner and I lose sight of my child. The sound is horrible even to my own ears, but I can't stop myself as I hurl myself against the ice that holds me, against which I ceaselessly fight.

A nurse stumbles into view, blood running down the length of her face, and she glances into the room where Hank is crumpled on the floor – where I'm frozen to the ground and gives a little sob before continuing to run away

Away from the priestess, who must be hurting people in her hurry to get out I stop screaming quiet suddenly when I see Hank twitch once again on the floor, see him begin to push to his feet-

"Hank!" I shout, desperate. "Please, Hank!"

He moans a little and turns to me, blinking hard, but then he gasps as he seems to put it all back together. Ella!" he shouts, frantic, turning to me, looking all around –

"No!" I gasp, looking hard towards the door, hoping to hell he takes my meaning. "Go! She she took him! She took Rafe! Go and get the baby!"

Hank nods once and forces himself to unsteady feet and then rushes to the door, pushing himself out of it. And then I lose sight of him and let out a little desperate wail of horror. Because there's – there's nothing I can do-

And the ice that surrounds me, it's burning me in its cold – and I'm shivering so hard here beneath it but held so completely still that I can't even feel myself shake-

Desperate, wailing, in complete panic, I press my eyes shut and try to think of something of anything that I can do

But there's nothing. I'm held still – my son has been stolen 1 my sister is wounded in the next room – mate is out on some mission that I know, in my heart, can't be going well if Xander was this many steps ahead of us

There's nothing nothing I can do – And so, sobbing, I do the only thing I can think of.

I close my eyes, and force myself into that state, and scream inwardly for my mother.

Sinclair

I clench my jaw against the moans and groans that want to crawl out of my throat as we drive. I refuse to allow them the dignity of utterance. After all they won't serve any good. Roger knows precisely how bad off I am now, and he's the only one here to hear me.

But still, the idea of Ella in danger somewhere, with Rafe –

I can't stand it. I have – I have to be by their side. Even if I don't have any idea how I'll be of any use to them when I get here. And I know that Roger feels precisely the same.

We're drawing close now – back to the city, back to the clinic – and I force myself to watch the scenery pass as Roger makes turn after turn, driving as quickly as he can.

It was a terrible decision to make, when we got in the car. Roger hesitated only for a moment, noting that Ella told us in her text to go to our dad – that there was some kind of attack there.

But in our hearts, we both knew we had to get to them – to Cora, to Ella. To our children. It's what our father would want us to do. But still, even beyond my bodily pain, the fear gnaws at me. Was our father even alive?

I press my eyes shut only for a moment as we draw close to the clinic, sending a little prayer out for our dad. I'm grateful, of course, that he got Ella, and Cora, and Rafe out through the trap door – but damn it, why had I been so short sighted in my design? Why hadn't I made some sort of accessible second entrance so that he could get out as well?

"Steady," Roger says, and I feel the car slow down now. My eyes open as I see that we're approaching the clinic. "Dominic, what's the plan here? Are we just going to burst in here? Or -"

But as Roger pulls the car towards the front of the building, our plan presents itself for us. Because out of the front of the building dashes a robed figure, her long hair streaming out behind her. I go tense as I recognize her instantly as one of the Goddess's priestesses – the one who performed Rafe's baptism.

My eyes sharpen as I realize that she has a baby in her arms, that she's running with him. And as Roger pulls the car to a short stop and throws it in park, I push my door instantly open.

As soon as the baby's cries reach my ears, I know that it's Rafe.

And as I watch – before I can do anything at all – a second figure dashes out after the Priestess, chasing after her, demanding that she give him the child-

And my eyes go red when I see who it is.

Hank.

I roar, pushing myself out of the door, but falling instantly to my knees as my body gives out on me – as my wounds protest and the pain takes over, shattering through me –

I put my hands down on the asphalt, willing myself to concentrate, to pull myself together –

But as I do, I hear Roger already on the move. With pain and effort, I raise my head. It's all I can do to watch as a snarl rips from Roger, as he dashes towards the Priestess and Hank, who has caught up with her now. I feel my wolf go wild when I see Hank punch the Priestess squarely across the face, as he reaches for the baby, who she drops in her pain and her fear –

But Hank grabs him from the air, pulling Rafe soundly to his chest –

But just as he does, just as Hank gets Rafe secure in his arms – Hank looks up, his eyes going wide as Roger's fist slams into his jaw.

Hank shouts, moans, and stumbles back two steps as I force myself to my feet, watching carefully. Because something – something is not right here –

Hank puts out his hand towards Roger, holding Rafe protectively against his chest, as Roger advances on him again, pulling his fist back and again punching Hank, hard. Hank goes to his knees, but even as Roger reaches down for the baby, tries to pull my son from his arms, Hank begs him not to –

I take a few shambling steps closer, the best I can manage and I can hear him, then, hear Hank begging Roger not to do it –

"Please!" Hank shouts. "You don't understand, Roger – she's trapped EI!"

But Roger isn't listening, blinded by his rage and his fear for my son, blinded by what is frankly probably his desire to kill Hank, for more reasons than one –

And finally, Roger rips Rafe still screeching from Hank's arms.

And that's when I put it all together.

That Hank he's not trying to take the baby –

He's trying to save –

I gasp in a deep breath, but before I can shout, I watch in horror as my brother hands the child back to the waiting Priestess. "Here," he growls. "Please, hold the baby while I finish this –"

"Roger!" I scream as the Priestess with a too-soft smile takes the baby from my brother's arms. "Roger, no!"

Roger spins to me, confused, as Hank lets out a frustrated shout and points to the priestess.

But Roger is the last to put it all together when he spins again to see her already running, already halfway gone. My baby in her arms.

Chapter 375 – The Cost

My internal screaming continues, echoing through me as I grab whatever bond I have to my Goddess mother and pull on it as hard as I can –

And I'm still screaming, there, in my mind and honestly maybe from my throat as well, I'm too far beyond myself now to know – when suddenly...

...She's here.

My mother's presence materializes first in my mind as she reaches for me, worried.

"Ella!" I hear her say, her voice chiming against my own frantic screams, "Ella, I am here!"

Shocked shocked to feel her, shocked that it worked – I find myself thrown out of my meditative state and into my own body, which is still freezing cold. But when my eyes fly open I gasp to see that she's-

She's actually here. Not just present in my mind – but standing before me. And as I blink frantically, letting my eyes adjust, I realize that she's not... physically here. Not in the way she was when we met her in the desert. But she's here in her spirit – she presents herself before me in an echo of her true form, a glowing, beautiful specter that reaches her hands out towards me.

"Mother!" I gasp. "Mom please – I need my baby – please release me -"

"Ella," she says, coming forward and reaching for me, though her hands can't quite touch my face. I feel her, though something about her touch tingles against my cheeks as she tries and fails to take my face in her hands. "I don't understand, child – I don't know what's happening -"

And then I'm sobbing, looking up at her, desperate for her to know but so cold now so incredibly cold – and unable to find the words to express it all-

"Close your eyes, darling," she murmurs, looking down at me with her beautiful, glowing face. "Show me."

And I do. I press my eyes shut and, sobbing, I press my thoughts – my memories – my fears – my ideas everything forward towards her. And I hear her gasp at first in shock, and then coo with understanding. –

"All right, Ella," she says softly, and I open my eyes again to see her shaking her head at me. "Your gift is bound, my love and I cannot –"

“Please, mother!” I sob, looking up at her in desperation. “Do something melt this ice, unbind my gift – go out go out and kill her just something my baby!”

I see her grief on the goddess’s face, her desire to help as well as her hesitation. We are from different realms – I know she is bound by rules different than me – but I can’t believe that there’s not something she can do.

Suddenly, her face goes grim. “Once, Ella,” she says, her face hard. “There is a way that I can interfere physically in your world once in your life. And I will never, ever be able to do it again. Are you sure that you want it to be now?”

“Yes!” I gasp, desperate. There is nothing else – – no other situation that I could imagine that could be worse – ” Please, mother, please.”

“There is a price,” she says, looking clearly into my eyes. “You will...not be able to call upon me again. Ever, Ella. It is the last time we will speak outside of one of my temples.”

And I gasp as I look up at her, as I realize that the price for this magic is.... our bond. She looks steadily down into my eyes as she nods, realizing that I understand.

“It is worth it, child,” she says softly to me. “I just wanted you to know what the cost was, so you could save your son.”

I stare at her, knowing I should think about it more – that I should hesitate a little-

But no part of me does. Sharply, I nod. I let her know that I know the price, and though it breaks my heart – I accept it.

“All right, darling,” she murmurs and then she leans forward and presses her lips against my forehead. “It will be all right.” And for a moment the press of her kiss against my forehead feels the same as her hands against my face –

just a slight tingle until, slowly, her lips grow warm and corporeal against my skin.

I gasp as I feel my wolf come howling back to me, her teeth ripping and gnashing inside me at the injustice done to her, in her eagerness to get out of here, to help our baby –

I look up at my mother, then – knowing it is done – knowing that she has used the magic of our bond to unbind my wolf and her gift. And in its unbinding, our connection has been... used up.

“I love you, Ella,” she says as she begins to fade from my sight. “You will always have a piece of me,” she says, reaching out hand to point towards my chest, where her gift grows warm. “Use it well.”

And then, quite suddenly, she is gone.

And I blink back to myself realizing that-

That even though that felt like a few long minutes with my mother, only seconds have passed –

And that I have to get to my son. Now. So I reach within myself, accessing the gift burning now, hot within me. And I hold onto it, and access its strength, and let it burn through me – through my mind, my heart, my skin And all around me the ice begins to melt.

Sinclair

My brother lets out a roar of rage, dashing away from Hank who sits limp on the ground outside the clinic, holding his head in agony.

But I'm already on the move, shifting into my wolf and bellowing in pain as I do so, as the wounds on my skin stretch horribly, as I feel my inner organs shift into my wolf form and the injuries in them scream in protest against it. But I'm in full panic now, running on fear and adrenaline, pushing myself to go after my son even though my body screams in my mind to stop –

That it can't-

But I ignore it, forcing myself forward beyond the pain, sprinting towards the priestess who carries my son. She's locked in my sight now, her form growing continually larger as I stream towards her, as I ignore my pain and hurl my body into the chase.

I see the moment that she hears me – she her hesitate in her steps, turn-

Her eyes go wide with horror as I pull together my last bit of will and leap for her. I can see the knowledge of her death on her face as she turns towards me, clutching the baby to her in fear as I slam my paws into her shoulders, hurling her backwards-

Her scream rips through the air as she falls, but the instant she loses her balance I reach with my teeth for the little bundle held in her arms, desperate to reach him –

And as she careens for the ground under the weight of my paws my incisors clench in the fabric of Rafe's pajama set – the clothes I dressed him in this morning with my own hands pulling him from her arms as she slams into the ground. My body crashes, hard, on top of the priestess, but I hold Rafe up by arching my neck as far as it will go –

And he doesn't touch her, or the ground he just dangles, screaming, held up by the safety of my teeth. I transform in an instant, reaching for him as I roll away from the priestess, groaning with pain but clutching my little boy safe against my chest –

I can't see, for the pain – I'm gasping, wincing with every passing breath –

Some part of me is aware that Roger is here now – that he chased after me in his wolf's body, that he was only a step behind –

And I hear him in action now as he tears at the priestess, as he rips at her throat and her face, ensuring that she's dead – beyond dead, if he can – sent straight to hell –

But I don't watch can't. All of my energy goes to staying conscious, to holding my little boy tight against me so that he's safe while I struggle for breath.

"Dominic!" I hear Roger panting beside me and then I feel his hands on my shoulders, on my skin – but I can barely register it, feeling myself slip away from the world. "Dominic!" he shouts now, shaking me, cursing frantically.

"Baby," I murmur, trying to hold Rafe out to his uncle. "Take...the baby." But even I know that my words don't make any sense, that I can't get them out.

Still, he understands. I feel Rafe lifted from me and I open my eyes just a little to see Roger standing up with him, tucking him safe against his arm. "I'll be right back, Dominic," he snarls, fierce in his determination to save me. But can I even be saved?

Everything feels...so far.

"I'll be right back!"

Then he's gone, and my son with him, and I'm alone here, staring up at the dark sky. And as I watch, the stars slowly start to blink out.

And everything fades to black.

Chapter 376 – Rolls Reversed

The gift burns through me and the ice strips away from my body faster than I thought possible, water sliding to the floor as I push myself out, as I free my legs and start to run.

I have to grab the door frame as I fly into the hall, using it to pivot around the corner and keep running towards the lobby where scared humans and wolves are pressed against the walls, staring around in hushed voices as nurses begin to treat those who were worst wounded by the rogue priestess who came through apparently willing to hurt anyone in her path –

I ignore them though I can't give them any of my attention right now. I'm focused, instead, on finding my son. I tear through the lobby, hurling the door open at the front of the clinic and bolting through it. I'm already running, my head swiveling, looking for any sign of the Priestess when I hear my name.

"Ella!" I spin, looking everywhere, and finally see Hank on the ground, his hand pressed against his head, his jaw looking painfully swollen. Before I can say anything though, he shoots a hand to his right, pointing off into the distance.

"That way!" Hank shouts. "Roger – Sinclair –"

I gasp in relief – but then fear chases it as I realize that I have no real idea what Hank means when he indicates that they're here –

I start off at a sprint, using all of my senses, needing to find them –

It's not long, though, before I see Roger stumbling towards me, covered in blood a little blue bundle in his arms-

A cry rips from my throat as I put on an extra spurt of speed to get to his side, reaching for my baby boy, tears bursting from my eyes and streaming from my face as Roger comes stumbling to a halt, holding him out to me.

"Is he" I gasp, grabbing my baby, simultaneously trying to hold him close and look him over –

"He's fine, Ella -" Roger says, taking me by the shoulders. But I don't look up at him, instead sobbing down at my little boy, who wails like a banshee in unhappiness and fright. I scan him through my tears but it looks like – I can't see anything wrong-

I close my eyes, seeking my bond with my child – hoping it can tell me more But I can't reach it, because Roger shakes me again.

"Ella!" Roger shouts, his hands still hard on my shoulders. "I'm serious, Ella! Rafe, I

think, is okay but... Dominic” He looks back over his shoulder and back towards the clearing behind the clinic.

I snap my head up to look at Roger’s face when he says my mate’s name. And when I see how grave his expression is...how worried...

The blood feels like it drains from me. Like I’m frozen, again, in the ice.

And I turn to look, to follow his gaze, and I see two dark forms laying there, so close to each other in the darkness. One covered in the folds of a priestess’ robes, the other...

I set off again in an instant, as fast as I can go – but I can’t run now – I can’t, with the baby in my arms

I feel someone tug at Rafe and my instincts kick in, making me snap towards whoever it is with a terrible snarl, my teeth fully bared, already elongating in my mouth

Roger opens his eyes wide in shock and puts up his hands, showing me that he means no harm. But he speaks fast. “Ella, the gift – you have to get to him now – please, give me the baby -”

And it breaks every part of my poor motherly heart to hand Rafe over to his uncle, every molecule within me screaming to hold him close, to never let him go again...

But one more glance towards those forms in the darkness has me decided, and I hastily hand my crying child to his godfather. Roger will take care of him, I know. And without a word I take off, sprinting towards my fallen mate.

Sinclair

I blink my eyes open in the forest and wince as the bright white light stings my eyes. Fuck, I think, covering the top half of my face with my hands. Is it already morning?

But then I realize, quite suddenly....

That I don’t remember going to bed.

I sit up, wary, trying to understand...

But I’m not even in my bed. Or...

Inside at all...

Confused, I look all around the bright forest and down at the soft bed on which I sit,

running my hands over the crisp white linens. Where the hell am I?

“Hey, handsome,” a soft voice says, and I whip my head up to look at her the beautiful woman standing in front of me. I blink, trying to clear my wide eyes

Because she’s so beautiful. She’s got to be she can’t be anything but...

“Are you an angel?” I ask, my voice low with awe. But she doesn’t answer my question with the soft smile I expect, instead bursting into laughter.

“No, Dominic,” she says, shaking her head and coming close to me, taking my face in her hands and smiling down into my face. “You’ve been asleep for a while. You’re confused. Think about it – you know me.”

“Am I...am I dead?”

She smiles down at me, slowly shaking her head. “No, baby,” she murmurs. “And I’d be worried about these questions, except Dr. Hank says your brain scan is fine. You’re just really, really exhausted.”

“What?” I ask, frowning up at her. But she just smiles at me again and steps closer before sitting herself in my lap. My arms wrap around her instinctually, as if that’s where they belong. As if I’ve done it a thousand times before.

“I’ve been trying for a long time,” she says, ignoring my question, “to get you to meet me here.”

I laugh a little myself. “I can’t come up with a reason why I would protest,” I murmur, looking down at her as she rests her head against my chest and starts to idly drag her fingers up and down the fabric of my shirt. She’s just... so beautiful...

“You weren’t ready,” she sighs. “We were really worried about you, Dominic. The baby especially.”

“The baby?” I ask, confused, and she lifts her head to frown up at me.

“Rafe,” she replies.

I just stare at her, confused, and she starts to shake her head at me, raising her hand to my cheek again. “You need to come back to me, Dominic,” she murmurs. “To both of us.”

“I – I’m not...trying not to...” I protest, horrified to disappoint her – but I don’t know what to do –

"It's okay," she sighs, cocking her head a little as she considers me. Maybe you just need more...time."

"More time?" I ask, starting to get frustrated. I look around the space where we're sitting, starting to get worried. Where the hell am I? Am I...am I dead? Imprisoned? What on earth is happening –

"Calm down, Dominic," she murmurs, sitting up and adjusting herself in my lap so that her legs are straddled wide across my own, so that her hands are linked behind my neck. When I turn to look her way – to protest that I can't calm down – I don't have any idea what's going on – I find her face close to mine, her eyes warm and kind.

"It's okay, baby," she murmurs, nudging me a little with her nose. "You just need to... remember who you are. So that you can come back to me."

And then she leans closer, and presses her mouth to mine, and I feel everything I am collapse at the touch of her mouth against my own. And then, as her lips part, and my arms tighten around her, holding her tight...

I feel myself begin to reform.

And my identity snaps into place.

Chapter 377 – Rebuild

“Hey, handsome,” I say again, in the real world this time. A little smirk pulls on my lips as Sinclair’s eyes flutter open. We’re laying pressed quite close together in the little hospital bed, so I can see every twitch of his eyelash as he begins to focus on me.

He doesn’t say anything at first, just stares at me while he takes a couple of deep breaths. And then, quite slowly, he lifts a hand close to my face, sliding the knuckle of his index finger slowly down the length of my cheek. “Hey, trouble,” he murmurs, his voice scratchy after so many days of disuse.

I burst into a happy grin, so thrilled to see him awake and aware that I can barely contain myself. But I force myself to stay still, to not grab him, to.... let him get used to consciousness again in his battered body..

“Rafe?” he asks, his eyes worried as his memories of his last conscious moments come back to him.

“He’s fine,” I say softly, gesturing with my chin behind my mate, hoping that he understands that the baby is here in the room with us, asleep. “He missed you,” I whisper. “He doesn’t like it when he doesn’t have his dad around to hold him.” I wrinkle my nose and playfully glare at my mate. “He likes you better.”

A little laugh shudders from Sinclair’s mouth. “Does not,” he murmurs, staring at me steadily, as if he can’t get enough of the sight of my face. “You feed him, and sing to him. When you leave the room, he looks for you.”

“Really?” I ask, surprised and pleased. I hadn’t known this before.

“Well, he’s not alone,” Sinclair smirks, shifting forward to press his forehead against mine, a gesture that makes me grin with pleasure, joy pulsing through me at a ridiculous rate to have him back. “You’re the center of the world, Ella. We all turn to you.”

“Good,” I sigh, content. “I like all my boys obsessed with me. Makes it easier to boss you around.”

Sinclair chuckles a little and then pulls back a bit, frowning. I sigh again, but in resignation this time because I know our little stolen moment of peace is over that he needs to know about the world and what’s happened since he’s been gone from it.

“The priestess?” he asks.

“Dead,” I say solemnly. “Roger killed her the moment after you knocked her down.”

“And Rafe is...”

“He’s totally fine,” I say, unable to keep the little smile from my mouth. ” Though I want to hear more about how you caught him in the air with your teeth and didn’t leave a mark on him, Dominic – ”

“Dad skills,” he says with a smug shrug that makes me laugh again. little

But then he continues. “Cora? Dad?”

“They’re both okay,” I say, raising my eyebrows with the pleased memory of using the gift on Cora, patching her up, and then the slightly worse memory of Henry arriving at the clinic, terribly battered needing quite a bite of care.

“It’s a long story,” I say with a sigh, but they’re both fine now. And so are you, by the way,” I add, giving him a little push on the shoulder, wondering why his own health is the last that he asked about. “Seriously? Not curious at all about what’s going on with you?”

“Well, I think I knew that,” he murmurs, rolling his shoulders a little experimentally and glancing down at himself, or at least as much as he can see tucked into the tiny bed with me. I’m not in pain anymore...”

“But you were asleep for three whole days, Dominic.”

“Really?” he asks, raising his eyebrows in surprise. “But you...healed me? With the gift?”

“Yeah,” I say quietly, watching him carefully. “I patched you up almost immediately when we got to you, and then Hank and Roger helped me get you inside – you’re very heavy -“I inform him, giving him a little glare that makes him laugh.

“So why was I asleep?” my mate asks me, smiling a little now.

“Apparently I can fix you up,” I say, ” but I can’t make new blood, or restore lost energy.” I pause here, letting the worry of the past three days creep my face a little. “It was really bad, Dominic. If I hadn’t been there, if I had ...if my gift had still been bound...” into

He shakes his head then and pulls me close so that my body is as flush against his as it can be, my head tucked neatly under his chin. “You saved me, Ella,” he sighs into my hair. “I can...never thank you. I’m so grateful. You’re a miracle.”

“I can’t lose you, Dominic,” I say quietly, my voice shaking a little as I hold him tight. “It was so...so scary. We can’t keep doing this – living like this. We have Rafe now – and the rest of our lives – I don’t want to do this anymore

“I know,” he replies, and I can feel him nodding, agreeing with me. “I’m so sorry, Ella.

Never again. You're right it's not worth it. I can't keep putting my body on the line like this. Peace, now. Peace."

"Do you promise?" I sigh, hoping to hell that he means it – because that's. all I want in the world. My mate, my baby, and peace.

"I promise," he says. "I swear it, Ella."

"Okay." I say, clenching my jaw shut against the hope that blooms in me. Because I want to believe him so bad...

But I also know that this isn't finished. That there are still loose ends that need to be tied up.

Sinclair is still holding me tight when we hear the soft creak of the door opening behind us. I lift my head a little, peering over Sinclair's arm. I smile when I see Hank peering through. the dim light of the room at us. It's late in the evening, but I've drawn the blinds closed anyway.

"Hey, Hank," I say, working to sit up.

He smiles at me and then blinks in surprise at Sinclair. "Is he up?" Hank asks. "Did calling for him in the dream finally work?"

"Yeah," I say, nodding happily as I lean forward and smile at my while Sinclair too works to sit up behind me. friend

"Hey, Hank," my mate murmurs, looking a little ruefully at him, which makes me laugh. "How's your jaw?"

"It's fine," Hank says, shooting my mate a smirking little glare as he comes to take the chart off of the end of the bed, flipping through it. "Roger has apologized, though I...don't think he liked it very much. How are you feeling?"

Sinclair lets the awkwardness pass and takes a deep breath, stretching his arms high over his head. "Rested," he answers, quite simply.

"Good," Hank says, tucking the chart away and looking Sinclair up and down. "Well, there's not much for me to do," he says a little ruefully as he crosses his arms. "Your mate has made my job obsolete, after all."

"Has she?" Sinclair asks, grinning proudly at me.

"Yes," Hank replies as I swing my legs off of the bed and begin to move towards Rafe,

who is still napping in his little basinet in the corner. "She healed you with a goddess' gift, and then you slept, and then she went to fetch you from your unconscious state in a dream state. None of which is... standard medical procedure," he continues with a casual shrug, "but... I'm starting to get used to this family's bizarre healing methods."

Sinclair laughs a little at this and leans back against the pillows, looking seriously at Hank as I pick up my sleeping baby, holding him close in my arms and letting him continue his little nap.

"I owe you an apology, Hank," Sinclair says quietly. "We all do. Well, not Cora," he says, tilting his head. "To be fair – she never suspected you had joined the cult of a dark god."

"And me!" I interrupt. "I only suspected for like, thirty seconds! And then again was team Hank!"

Hank laughs quietly, shaking his head and holding up a hand. "No, I get it. I mean, I was offended at first but once Ella and Cora explained it to me, and I got to see Roger grovel a little bit," he smirks here, "which was...quite satisfying in its own way. Well, after all of it, I understand."

Hank tilts his head a little and looks seriously into my mate's eyes before continuing. "I do hope, though," he says quietly, significantly, "that any doubts that you had are now gone."

"I saw the way you chased the woman who kidnapped my son, Hank, how you tried to get him back," Sinclair says seriously, holding Hank's gaze. "I saw what you did for us, and I know what you've done. You have this family's faith forever, along with its gratitude."

Hank nods his head a little, accepting. "Friendship," he says quietly. "Would be enough."

"Well that you have," I assure him, giving him a big smile. "Also forever."

"Good," Hank says, smiling at both of us. "Because there's still a lot of work to do, healing this nation. And together, I think we could do a lot of good."

And as I step to Sinclair's side, smiling at our friend, I'm newly excited about getting started on that work.

Chapter 378 – Family Planning

We're an almost ridiculously cheerful group about an hour later when Roger and Cora come to join me and Sinclair in his little clinic room.

Roger is first through the door, his face stark with worry as he storms into the room after getting word – probably from Hank – that Sinclair is awake.

"Dominic -" he says, all anxiety as Cora follows him in, closing the door quietly behind them. But Roger stops in his tracks when he sees Dominic sitting up happily in bed, smiling down at Rafe who has just woken up from his nap and finished eating. I'm sitting happily on Sinclair's side, so I have a front-row seat.

"Hey, Rog," Sinclair says, looking up and giving his brother a warm smile.

"Seriously?" Roger asks, staring a little dumbfounded at his brother. "You – you sleep for three days after being miraculously healed and all I get is 'Hey Rog'?"

"What else do you want?" Sinclair asks, frowning confusedly at his brother.

"I don't know," Roger says, throwing out an exasperated hand. "Something more significant I guess – maybe some kind of address to the fact that you had us worried sick when you wouldn't wake up

"Ignore him," Cora says happily, crossing the room to Sinclair's side and dropping a happy little kiss on his cheek. "He's just had a hard couple of days groveling to Hank after punching him in the face and handing Rafe back to his kidnapper."

Roger scowls, sinking his hands into his pockets and glaring around at the three of us. "Seriously? Three days later, and I can't get a break about that?"

"We've forgiven you," I say, raising my eyebrows and gesturing between me and Cora – and, I admit, enjoying his awkwardness a little bit. "But Dominic," I say, pointing at my mate now, "hasn't even had a chance to be mad. Not to mention Rafe, when we tell him in ten years. He's gonna be pissed."

Roger clenches his hands into fists and glares around at all of us, starting to get pissed again, and Sinclair – to my glee – feeds into it.

"You're demoted," he says with a deep Alpha's command, glaring back at his brother. "No longer my Beta, Roger. I'll see what I can do about getting you some menial command, see if you can earn my trust back-

"Dom-" Roger gasps, his face falling, but the slow smile that spreads across Sinclair's face has me and Cora cackling. Roger quickly figures out the joke.

“Jackass,” Roger growls, taking a few steps forward to smack his brother on the calf.

“Ow!” Sinclair gasps, pretending to be hurt and flinching his leg away.” Roger, I’m healing -”

Roger’s face goes slack, but when we all burst again into laughter he just crosses his arms and glares at us. “I reject all of you,” he murmurs, staring at each of us in turn. “I break the bonds of mate, of family, of...sister-in-law,” he continues, though I can see him fighting his smile. “Because I refuse to spend my life bonded to jerks who take joy in my guilt and pain – ”

“Oh, get over it, Roger,” Sinclair interrupts, laughing and looking down at Rafe now, who coos and smiles, apparently picking up on the good mood in the room. “It’s fine. No one blames you for anything. Except maybe Hank.”

Roger groans a little, sitting down on the edge of the bed as Cora comes to his side, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “I almost wish it was Hank who betrayed us and tried to kidnap Rafe,” he murmurs, looking up at his mate. “Then I wouldn’t have to be nice to him.”

“Poor baby,” Cora murmurs, frowning insincerely down at him. “You’ll just have to get over it. And, of course, admit I was right.”

“Never,” Roger growls, pulling her close and making her laugh.

“How’s the baby, Cora?” Sinclair asks, shifting Rafe who he hasn’t put down for a moment since he got the baby in his hands so that he can look all around at us. I bite my lip a little as I watch my mate with his baby boy, pleased to see the obvious love that runs between the two of them.

“Baby is okay,” Cora says, smiling down at herself and putting a hand over her stomach. “We were worried for a little bit – I also lost a lot of blood 1 but after Ella healed me,” she gives a little shrug and meets Sinclair’s eyes again. “We were anxious for a day or two but Roger says that the connection is still strong. I don’t think there’s any reason to be worried anymore.”

“Good,” Sinclair says, raising his eyebrows. “Rafe needs his buddy.”

“Oh yes,” Cora says, raising her eyebrows a little sarcastically, “As long as Rafe gets his buddy, I’m glad my pregnancy can continue.”

“Precisely the right attitude, sis,” I sigh, leaning against my mate.

“Where is dad?” Sinclair asks, leaning back into me.

Roger tilts his head back towards the door. “In another room. He’s okay too but he’s... tired. And I think he feels a lot of guilt.” He grimaces a little and I do as well. Henry and the rest of the men took a hard beating at the bunker. They ultimately came out victorious, but... not everyone made it. I know that Henry feels a lot of guilt for what everyone went through – and especially for putting his grandkids at risk.

All of us – Sinclair aside, of course – have spent a lot of time trying to convince Henry that we all agreed to the plan, we all thought it was best. But he hasn’t let it go.

“You should talk to him,” Roger says

quietly, shaking his head at his brother. “He...he might listen to you.”

“I will,” Sinclair says seriously, his eyes on his own son. And I intuit, perhaps through our own bond, that he’s hoping to hell he never puts Rafe in a similar situation, or that he never, ever feels like he’s failed Rafe in the same way his father feels he’s failed his children now. “Of course I will.”

I press myself tighter against my mate’s side, sending a little pulse of love and reassurance down our bond. I want him to know that it’s never going to be like that. Sinclair turns to me, grateful, and presses a little kiss to my forehead.

I nudge him with my nose as he turns back his brother and I look that way too, but instead of Roger, I find my eyes falling on Cora who looks at me with something a little strange in her eyes. And as I tilt my head at her, curious, I

see her blush and look away.

And I realize, quite suddenly, that it’s jealousy. Because while she and Roger are incredibly close, and growing closer every day...she doesn’t have the wolf’s bond with Roger that I have with Sinclair. And I know, in my heart, that she wants it. Maybe even feels a little bit guilty that she can’t give that to him.

My face falls when I realize this and I call her name softly as Roger and Sinclair chat about more details of the raid on the bunker, but she looks sharply at me and shakes her head. I slowly close my mouth, glancing at Roger and realizing that she doesn’t want him to know that she feels like she ...I don’t know. Has failed him in some small way? That his choice in her as his mate means he gives up some of the things he always thought he’d have in his relationship?

My heart breaks to think that she thinks that because I know that’s not how Roger feels.

But I nod to my sister, letting her know that I won't say anything. And she gives me my own little nod in response, letting me know she's grateful for my secrecy.

I smile at Cora but then Sinclair's words draw my attention.

"We have to decide," he says, looking between us as Rafe wraps a hand around his dad's gigantic finger, "what our next step is. What we want to...do next. As a family."

"Really?" I ask, surprised. "No more reconnaissance meetings? No more board room councils? Just...us deciding?"

"Well, those didn't work, did they?" Sinclair asks quietly, glancing down at Rafe who gives a happy little noise that makes us all smile. "Dad will be involved, of course, but I think that moving forward..."

My mate glances around at the rest of us, trying to gauge how we feel. "I promised Ella peace," he says quietly, and I meant it. But I think that the best way forward with that is to...stick together. Us four. No more splitting up, no more dividing our forces. Because we have work to do."

"Well, I, for one, like it," Cora says, raising her eyebrows and looking around at all of us. "We've got a doctor, two gigantic wolves, a goddess-gifted healer... I think we're quite a force to be reckoned with."

"Hey," I say, frowning at my sister. "I'm a wolf too."

"Fine," she says loftily, "two and a half gigantic wolves."

"And one and a half tiny babies!" I point out, leaning in to tickle Rafe's stomach and making him laugh. "Who are very cute, if helpless!"

"They're here for morale," Sinclair rumbles beside me, making me grin. "All right," Roger says. "So, we stick together from here on out. But what do we want to do next?"

And as the four of us look around at each other, I realize that...none of us has a plan.

What on earth are we going to do next?

Chapter 379 – Battered

The four of us spent the next few hours talking, eventually ordering quite a bit of takeout and making some complicated plans while Sinclair ate his weight in Chinese food. The sight of him eating pleased me to no end, but eventually I could see him running out of steam.

“All right,” I say quietly, looking significantly at Cora and Roger. “I thinkwe have enough to go on for now. We can pick up again tomorrow.”

“What?” Sinclair asks, frowning around at us though I can see him stifling a yawn. “We have so much to do-”

“Enough,” I say significantly, placing my little hand over his larger one.” You’re still exhausted, Dominic.”

He frowns at me and opens his mouth, ready to fight, but I shake my head once. “Tomorrow,” I say, my voice a command. He narrows his eyes at me but I stand strong. “I understand, Dominic. I know it’s in your nature to tear the world apart in the effort to make it all better as fast as you can. But please, for me, can you start tomorrow?”

He hesitates but sees the sorrow and worry in my face and, slowly, nods. This is the last day you get to boss me around, trouble,” he growls, not happy about it. “Tomorrow, I’m in charge again.”

“I’ll take it,” I say, leaning forward to give him a kiss on the cheek, Rafe curled happily in my arms.

“I think it’s a good plan,” Roger says, yawning himself and stretching his arms. He and Cora stand up and he wraps an arm around her waist, smiling down at her. “Ready for bed, little mate?”

“Sure, little mate,” Cora replies, grinning up at him, knowing precisely what she’s doing. “What?” Roger says with a start, frowning down at her. “That doesn’t work, Cora – you’re the little one – ”

“But it’s sweet!” she says, pretending to be innocent and making me grin. I’m little mate, you’re little mate – ”

“I’m not little,” he growls.

“Awww,” she says, patting his cheek fondly. “Sure you’re not, baby.” And as she turns to head out of the room Roger growls, storming after her, and I laugh a little to see how well she knows him.

“They really do work,” Sinclair says to me after they close the door. “She knows just how to push his buttons. And Roger needs a good teasing to keep him in line.”

“And you?” I ask, perching on the side of the bed. “Do you need to be kept in line?”

“No,” he says, letting his voice drop into that deep, dominant register I like so much. “I am always in charge, Ella. And you wouldn’t want me any other way.”

“Damn right,” I murmur, leaning forward to kiss my mate, letting him feel just how much I like it down the bond. The hum in Sinclair’s chest deepens as he pulls me a little closer, letting one of his hands drift suggestively down my back.

But I sigh and pull away. “Baby’s still up,” I say, nodding down at him. “And you need your rest. I’m going to take him for a little walk around the clinic, okay? While you try to get some sleep?”

“I’ll come with you,” Sinclair says, starting to stand up, but I put a hand out to his shoulder, asking him to stop.

“Please, Dominic,” I beg, letting him see my sincerity in my eyes. “I promise, tomorrow you can go full steam and I won’t say anything. Just...please just get one more good night’s sleep, okay? For me? So I can...I can know you’re all right?”

And he sighs as he sits back against the pillows, but I can see the tired lines settle onto his face as he does. “All right, Ella,” he says.

I kiss him on the cheek, moving the TV remote closer to him so that he can put something mindless on to distract himself so that his mind doesn’t spin while he rests.

“You’ll come back soon?” he asks quietly.

“As soon as the baby’s asleep,” I promise, nodding. Although I cross my fingers just a little bit, because I intend to stay out until I know Sinclair is able to fall into a true, restful sleep whether Rafe is asleep or not.

And then I kiss my mate again and, with a final squeeze of his hand, slip out the door. When I pull the door shut behind me, I turn to find Hank leaning against the wall outside of the door, as I knew he would be.

“Ready to get to work?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow at me.

“You betcha,” I say with a sigh, squaring my shoulders. Then Hank passes me a cloth baby carrier and I let him hold Rafe while I strap it to my chest. Once we get the baby strapped in and settled, I look up at him again.

“Okay,” I say, nodding to my friend. ” Let’s get started.”

Hank and I work side-by-side long into the night tending to the men who were hurt either in the bunker or on the expedition to Xander’s house. I’ve been at Hank’s side every moment that I haven’t been pinned to my mate’s side for the past three days.

It was terrible to continually have to choose between my responsibilities. Every part of my body wanted to be constantly next to Sinclair, holding his hand, being there for him while his body and mind healed from his horrible experience.

But I also have responsibilities as the Luna of this pack, as the bearer of the Goddess’s gift, to use it to heal the men who made such terrible sacrifices for us.

The first night was the worst. Shortly after we got Sinclair inside the clinic was flooded with the men coming in from the bunker 1 some with horrible wounds that needed immediate care. I had to make a horrible decision, then, to prioritize my mate and my sister – to heal them first – while I could hear the men’s screams from the other room.

Tears had poured from my eyes as I did it, as Hank guided me towards the worst of Sinclair’s and Cora’s wounds, making sure they would each survive before I fled to the other rooms and went to work on the men there.

We couldn’t...we didn’t save everyone. I couldn’t get to them fast enough.

And it was horrible – achingly horrible – to hear their cries fade to nothing as worked on one of their comrades across the room. Hank forced me to turn away from the men in the early hours of the morning, when I could barely keep my eyes open.

I had wanted to keep going, but he had been firm. “Enough, Ella,” he had snapped when I had insisted I wanted to do more. “They’ll survive – everyone who is alive tonight will be alive tomorrow. You need to sleep.”

And so I did. I tended to my child, and I slept, and I called to my mate in the dream state for as long as I could, and then I woke up and started again.

But we’ve made good progress in three days. Even if...well, there’s still an incredible amount to do. And every moment that I’m away from them, it tortures me to think of them sitting in here, in pain, waiting.

I follow Hank from bed to bed, where he informs me about the next wound he thinks I should concentrate on with the gift. The list is growing less and less severe as we go. At first it was terrible wounds leaking blood around torn muscles and shattered bones. But now I spend a great deal of my time reknitting sliced muscles, regrowing skin, setting

fractures. I admit, I'm glad that it's getting less gory.

"Ready?" Hank asks as we move on to the next case.

"Yup," I say, nodding once and steeling myself, running a hand over Rafe's sweet head as a way to calm my troubled spirit. "Let's go."

"Thank you, Luna," the man I just worked on calls after me, and I send a smile to him over my shoulder.

"Any time, soldier," I say, meaning every word of it. "It's the Luna's job to take care of her pack."

Chapter 380 – Persistence

Sinclair

I wake up frowning, knowing immediately that something is...well, not wrong, but certainly off. I reach out an arm, seeking Ella, but my hand passes over cold sheets. My frown deepens as I sit up and realize that she's not here. A glance at Rafes bassinet makes it clear that he's not here either.

Where the hell is my family?

I sigh, swinging my legs out of the bed, wondering how much time has passed. As I scrub a hand down my face I consider that it can't have been much – there's still no daylight peeking around the blinds. So, a few hours at most. But why the hell hasn't she come to bed?

I stand and head for the door, wondering what the hell trouble is getting up to now. I smirk a little to consider it. Ella...well, it's part of her appeal, isn't it? She's always up to something. I'll certainly never be bored by her side.

The hallway outside my room is empty but I head down it towards where I hear a few murmuring voices. But when I turn into the room, I'm surprised because the first person I see is my father, sitting quietly in his chair by the door, staring into the room.

We don't say anything to each other as I lean against the doorway by his side, because we're both aware that I didn't come here seeking him. I give him a nod and place a hand on his shoulder as my eyes turn to her – Ella, across the room, my infant son sleeping pressed against her chest while she holds her hands out over one of my wounded men, healing him.

"She's going to wear herself out," my father says quietly.

"How long has she been at it?"

"Hours," he says, shaking his head. "She's been burning her candle at both ends for days, Dominic. She's...very dedicated, she wants to do good. But she gives too much."

I nod, understanding, agreeing silently. My kind mate with her big heart she can't stop giving, even if it means giving all of herself. But that's where I come in. It's my job to take care of her, when she'd burn herself out taking care of the whole world if I let her.

I stand for a few long moments with my father, watching her work, knowing it won't do any good to interrupt her in the middle of her task. I'm content to wait in silence, but my father surprises me with his next words.

"I'm so sorry, Dominic," he says, his voice thick with grief.

Shocked, I look down at him. "What?"

He just shakes his head slowly, looking up at me with such regret –

"I almost cost you – cost us everything. I played right into the enemy's hands and risked your mate, your child -" He covers his face with his hand, unable to look at me. "I failed you, Dominic -"

"Stop that," I snap, tightening my hand on his shoulder.

"It was so stupid, to send you away and leave Cora and Ella unprotected – I should have seen it coming, that of course they would follow us back to the bunker after the first attack in the sewer that of course they were just biding their time – Xander has nothing but time -"

"Enough," I growl, starting to get angry with him. "This was not your fault, dad -"

"It was my plan – "

"It was our plan!" My voice comes out louder, harsher than I meant it to. But my dad just looks up at me, more helpless than I've seen him...maybe ever.

"We all agreed to this, dad," I continue, working hard to bring my voice back down to a calmer register. "Me, Roger, Ella, Cora – all of our men, the whole team. We all fell for it, we were all..." I sigh, shutting my eyes and reliving the shame that flooded me the moment I realized that Xander was working to trap us in that house, that he was going after the girls and the baby. "We all messed up, almost cost ourselves everything. You are not alone."

Dad opens his mouth to protest, to continue, but his voice fails him. And he just hangs his head, breaking my heart.

"What's all this?" I hear Ella ask, and I look up from my father to see her standing before us, her eyes wide with worry as she absently drifts a hand over the soft black fuzz of Rafe's hair.

I'm silent for a beat as I try to figure out what to say, but then I just shake my head. "It's nothing, Ella," I respond, not wanting to add to her plate. I can see by the darkness under her eyes that she's exhausted too. "Just ...the fallout."

She nods, accepting my incomplete explanation, and focuses her eyes on my father. "Haven't we been through this already?" she asks quietly. "No one blames you." I nod,

agreeing with her, looking down at my father for a response.

But he just waves his hands at us. "Let an old man have his guilt," he sighs, working hard to give us a tired smile. "It gives us something to dwell on to fill these long days. But you two -" he shifts his eyes to Rafe now, dozing against Ella's chest. "You have better things to worry about. You should get that child to bed."

"Yes," Ella agrees, a little guilty, starting to unstrap the baby carrier. "Will you take him, Dominic? I wouldn't have kept him out here so long - I just didn't want to risk him waking you if he got up in the middle of the night -"

"Ella," I interrupt, stern, and she looks up at me with surprise. "You're going to bed with the baby. Come on." I step forward and hold out a hand.

"Oh no," she says, shaking her head and backing up a step. "I have too much to do there's - there are more -"

wounded men who I need to -"

"Ella," I repeat, closing the distance between us and putting a hand on her elbow. "You've done enough." I lower my voice so that just she can hear me, so that it's barely more than a rumble in my chest. "You need to rest, trouble. They want you to rest too."

Ella looks over her shoulder then at the room full of half-healed men. Most of them are asleep but those who are not look up at her with grateful eyes - not a single one of them looking at her with need, or anger, or desperation. They're incredibly grateful for what she's doing for them - I know they are because I feel the same way. She's earned their loyalty through and through and each and every one of them would choose to let her rest, now, rather than wearing her out trying to fix them. Especially not now, when they've only got relatively minor wounds left.

Still, Ella bites her lip and hesitates. "There's just...so much more to do..."

I step behind her then, wrapping my arms around her and letting her lean back against me. I give her a moment to collect her thoughts, but my embrace communicates in no uncertain terms that she's in my care now. So, she'd better wrap it up.

As she looks around the room I follow her eyes. "Where's Hank? Or Cora?" I ask quietly, looking for a doctor.

"Cora's asleep," she answers. "And Hank...well, he went to bed a while ago too. And I... kind of snuck back in. And kept working."

"We told her not to, sir!" One of my closest soldiers calls to me. "She wouldn't be"

budged.”

I smirk a little and nod to the soldier before resting my chin on top of Ella’s head. “Trouble, through and through,” I say, and she laughs a little, stroking Rafe’s sleeping head again. “Come on,” I say, giving her a little tug towards the door.

“It doesn’t feel right, Dominic,” she sighs. “To leave them here in pain.”

“You can start again when you’re rested,” I say quietly, leading her away. “I’ll help.”

“Are you coming?” she asks my dad when we get to the door. “It’s late.”

“You go,” he replies, waving a tired hand at us. “I’m not tired yet.” “But,” she starts, all concern, but he looks up at her with worried make her fall silent. eyes that

“I couldn’t sleep if I tried, my dear,” he says quietly. “Go rest – leave an old man to his thoughts.”

Ella and I leave then, but I know that both of our thoughts are on him worried for him. Neither of us say a word as we return to our little hospital room and turn in for bed.

Chapter 381 – Future Plans

It takes days to finish healing all of the men – long days with Cora and Hank by my side, explaining the intricate details of the wounds. We've found that it helps me concentrate the gift more completely when I know what is wrong that it helps me to stitch all of the flesh together neatly instead of just throwing a bunch of power at it and hoping that it sticks.

The gift itself does not deplete – I feel no lessening of it as I continue to use it for hours on end, day after day – but I certainly feel the toll on my own body as the days pass. It's good work and I don't mind doing it, but healing men, being the mother to a newborn, and mate to a man who will soon be crowned King of our little war-torn country? It's...a lot.

Sinclair tried to help at first, standing with me while I performed my work, but eventually I shooed him off with the baby because I knew his energies would be better put elsewhere and that he could concentrate on Rafe better than I can when I spend half the day in a meditative state. And I also knew that it was driving Sinclair a little crazy, just standing there watching me, trying to be supportive.

But now, as I finish up turning the final patch of burned skin on the final soldier smooth and clear, I stand up with a smile, brushing my hands against my leggings and wondering where he is.

"Thank you, Luna," the soldier says, and I beam down at him happily.

"Glad to do it. Hopefully you get some lighter service, though," I say, cocking my head as I smile at him. "Fancy being a secretary at all?"

He laughs and shakes his head, running a hand over the freshly-healed skin and marveling at it. "Not a chance, Luna," he says. "I'm a fighter, through and through. I'll go back on the field for you and the Alpha any day."

"Well, hopefully not anytime soon," I sigh, patting him on the shoulder and turning away to go look for my mate.

I feel quite light, suddenly, at the realization that it's done. Hank gives me a wave from across the room where he's consulting with some of the men who are going to need physical therapy after their wounds the healing does great things, but it doesn't do everything – and I happily wave back as I pass out of the room, heading to the back of the clinic where Roger and Sinclair have tended to meet.

I sigh a little as I look around the clinic as I pass through it. We haven't left in days, instead turning it into a little barrack in itself. And honestly, part of me is very pleased to be done with this so that we can get out of here. I'm incredibly grateful for this place, for

letting it be a place of healing but...well, I want to go home. I want to sleep in my big bed and tuck my little baby into his bassinet. I want a normal night's sleep.

But then I remember that...well, that the last time we left that bedroom there were corpses all over it. And I honestly have no idea what state it's in now – did Sinclair like... send someone to clean it up? Or are they just... rotting...

I stick out my tongue a little in disgust and turn my mind away from the question as I arrive at the door in the back. But still the sentiment is there. I'm dying to get home. I miss my normal life.

But what even was my normal life anymore? Did it exist? Or did Xander wipe it all out when he came for my son?

I sigh, giving a little knock on the door as I push it open.

Four dark heads look up at me and smile as I come into the room, and I laugh a little again at the sight of my tiny baby strapped in his carrier across my gigantic mate's chest. He just looks so small against the wide expanse of Sinclair's body.

"There he is," I say, giving everyone a nod but fixing my eyes on my son as I move over to him. "And how is my baby doing?"

"I'm great," Sinclair says, grabbing my hand before I can touch the baby and pulling me to his warm side, pretending a jealousy that makes me laugh.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," I say, standing on my tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek before starting to unstrap Rafe from Sinclair's body, wanting him in my arms.

"Are you all finished, Ella?" Henry asks. Roger stands up straight and tucks his hands into his pockets, listening curiously.

"Yes!" I say with a cheerful sigh, bouncing my happy baby a little in my arms. "Everyone is finally all patched up."

"Incredible," Henry says with a marvelous smile that warms me from the inside out. He's been so dour lately – it's good to see him smile. "That kind of turnaround after that level of wounds – it's quite miraculous."

"Powerful," Roger adds, his brow lifting. "Imagine what you could do if you were actually on a battlefield, turning soldiers around..."

I frown at him a little. "I'm not sure I want to think of my mother's gift as a weapon in war," I say, thinking aloud. "True," he concedes with a shrug. That does seem...a little

anti-goddess, doesn't it?"

"What are you all up to?" I ask, looking at the table before them which is predictably scattered with paper. "And where is Cora?"

"We're making plans," Sinclair informs me, putting a steady hand on my back. "For our next steps. We'll want to know what you think."

"And Cora is in with a lady doctor she called to come and check her out," ((Roger says with a little shrug. "Although I don't see why that's necessary," he adds with a tiny scowl. "Considering she is a lady doctor."

"You can say OBGYN, Roger," I say, laughing.

"He's just mad," Sinclair says to me in a false whisper that he knows is loud enough for Roger to hear, "because the lady doctor wouldn't let him come in to the checkup so she and Cora could talk privately."

"It's ridiculous," Roger grumbles, leaning over the table and pretending to stare down at the papers. "My baby too – don't see why I can't be there."

I just laugh at my sister's protective new mate who wants to be at her side at all times and take a step closer to my own mate. Honestly, I understand the feeling.

"So, what are the new plans?" I ask, nudging Sinclair with my elbow and looking up at him. "Do we know what we're going to do next?"

"We have...options," Sinclair says contemplatively, staring into space a little. "Honestly, a lot of it hinges on what you and Cora think is best-

Before he can explain why, though, the door opens again and Cora's bright face peeks through. "Did I hear my name?"

Roger crosses the room to her in a flash, taking her hand and looking her over as if the other doctor might have done her some kind of harm. But Cora just laughs at him and swats her hands at him a little bit, pushing the door closed.

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" she says before he gives a little growl and pulls her tight against his side.

"What did she say?" he asks.

"I'll tell you later," she says with a happy grin, and while I definitely want to know as well, I accept that there are some things that Cora wants to keep private between herself and

her mate." But everything is fine," she adds, running an absent hand over her stomach. "Nothing to worry about."

"Good," he says, all in a rush, and I can see the real relief on his face.

"But I heard my name?" Cora says, turning to the rest of us curiously.

"Apparently we have decisions to make," I tell her, hoisting Rafe in my arms a little so that I can press a kiss to the top of his head. He's starting to get a little fussy now – I know he's hungry.

"Yes," Henry says. "We've had news of Xander's whereabouts," he continues, which surprises me so much that I feel my blood go a bit cold. "And in light of them, we've got some...big decisions to make."

"Yes," Sinclair adds, and I look up at him, surprised again to see that his eyes are fixed on Cora. "And much of what we do next really depends...well, Cora? It depends on what you want to do."

"Me?" she asks, baffled.

And I feel the same emotion run through me. How did Cora get placed at the center of all of this? I mean – it's not that I begrudge her the spot, I'm happy to let Cora take the lead. But as the single human involved in wolf affairs –

What is it that they want her to decide?

Chapter 382 – Cora’s Decision

“What?” Cora asks, laughing a little as if it’s a ridiculous notion. “What on earth could I have to pick and choose from?”

“Let’s back up a little,” Roger says, tugging her into the room and gesturing towards one of the chairs around the table. As she settles herself into a seat Sinclair pulls over the little armchair that I’ve been using when I feed Rafe, and I murmur my thanks to him as I settle down in it. As Roger begins, Sinclair swiftly hands me all of the things I need to feed Rafe – a burp cloth, a little blanket to throw over my shoulder, etc. – and I smile to myself at his consideration in anticipating my needs without me having to ask.

My Alpha is a warrior, but he’s also a sweetheart. And I’m grateful for him every day. Everyone waits for me to get settled, but then once Rafe is happily eating Henry begins.

“We discovered,” Henry begins, his eyes moving between me and Cora, that Xander has fled east to Adalaxia.”

“Shit,” Cora sighs, slumping down in her chair. My emotions match hers. We knew that Xander was on the run we’d largely decimated any of his that martial forces in taking out his priests. But our great fear was that in the time it took us to regroup, that he’d leave the country and find allies who might help him.

And it looks, now, like he did precisely that.

“Is Adalaxia...a good place for him to go?” I don’t know a lot about the neighboring kingdom, especially as I was raised as a human and hadn’t known that overlying the map of the human world there was a hidden world of wolf kingdoms with its own wars and politics. Of course, ever since Damon broke the secret of the of the wolves to the human world those maps have increasingly combined to become one, but still – what I don’t know about wolf politics could probably fill its own book.

Which, considering that I’ll likely soon be Queen, is...unfortunate. But I force myself to pay attention to Henry’s answer.

“Adalaxia is a notoriously ruthless wolf nation,” he sighs. “They stick even more strictly to what they perceive as the traditions of wolf kind even more than we do. In comparison to them we are...ridiculously liberal.”

“What does that mean?” Cora asks, crossing her arms over her chest, her face worried and confused.

“It means,” Roger explains, “that Xander has likely found allies with a group who would not be on board with our own nation’s current policy, which is that wolves and humans

are equal and deserve to be treated with the same respect. They would also," he continues, hesitating now and looking between me and Cora, "really not like the fact that we're having this conversation with our mates. For Adalaxians, women are..."

"Second-class citizens, at best," Sinclair finishes for him. "And at worst, property."

"What?" I gasp, my eyes going wide. "Seriously? Are they also a nation that's been frozen in time for five hundred years?"

"I mean, it's not a bad way to think of it," Roger says, tilting his head to the side. "Women there are not taught to read or write, they have almost a completely separate culture and stay strictly within their homes. It is...not great, in terms of rights."

"Gross," Cora says, her face clearly displaying her disgust. "Though, it makes sense why Xander would go there, considering how he tried to use Ella as his broodmare."

"Precisely," Sinclair says, nodding along with her. "And they're staunch nationalists and monarchists as well. They're likely to respect Rafe's claim to our future throne as Xavier's grandson, not as my son. And, as such, would see Xander's claim to the role of regent as... legitimate."

"That's all so ridiculous," I say, sighing as I look down at my baby, this innocent little person around whom so much revolves.

"Agreed," Sinclair says, reaching out to place a comforting hand on my shoulder. "It's unfortunate that he was able to get there so fast. This would all be much easier if we had caught him at the border, had been able to prosecute him here without having to go through a foreign government to do it."

"Why?" I ask. "Can't we just...demand that they give him back? Extradition, or whatever?"

"We could," Sinclair replies, looking seriously down at me. "If I was King. Which, currently, I am not."

I blink up at him for a second, confused, and then put all of the pieces together. "Ohhhh," I say, my eyes going wide. Because while all of the other claims to the throne within our country have been disposed of, and it's rather a foregone conclusion that my mate will take the throne....

He hasn't done it yet. Which means, technically, that he doesn't yet have access to any of the powers which would allow him to make any of these demands.

"Well, how fast can you do it?" Cora says, sitting up straight and looking easily at

Sinclair. "Can we do like... some kind of quick and dirty coronation? Slap a crown on you and get you on a throne by morning?"

We all laugh a little at the idea of this, but there's no real cheer in it, because I think we all know the answer. "It's more complicated than that," Sinclair says, running a hand through his hair. "First, I have to claim it, and then my claim has to be ratified by the governors. It's...all a bunch of bureaucratic nonsense. Interestingly the kind of bureaucratic nonsense that the Atalaxians don't care about. In their country, I'd have been king the moment I killed Damon. But," he shrugs a little, rueful. "That's what we get for wanting to live in a nation in which the people have a say in their lives. It's a better process – but it takes longer."

"Well," I say, looking up at him. "Can we get it started?"

"We can," Sinclair says, nodding down at me. "But this is where your choice comes in, Cora," he says, shifting his gaze to her.

"Seriously," Cora says, spreading out her hands on the table. "I can't with the suspense anymore. Can one of you please just tell me what's going on?"

"Until Dominic is King and we have access to the state military and protection," Roger says quickly, "we don't think it's a good decision to split up anymore. Which we all agreed to."

"It has been a disaster, hasn't it?" Sinclair says, looking down at me again. "Every time we try to leave you two home for safety, we either get torn up or you do. Or both."

"So we're staying together from here on out," Roger says, gesturing around the room. "The six of us. Or, well," he glances at Cora's stomach. "Six and a half."

"I would like to point out," Cora says, "that this was my plan from the start – but noooo, I wasn't allowed to go to the sewer, was I?"

"Yes, you're very clever," Roger says placatingly, rolling his eyes a little before moving on, which makes me laugh lightly. "But, Cora, if we get everything started with Dominic's coronation, that means that..."

He hesitates now, as if he knows what he says will hurt her.

"What?" she pushes, dying to know and getting a little frustrated.

"It means that you wouldn't be able to go to the temple any time soon," Sinclair finishes. "To ask your mother for answers to the big questions you have. About your baby, and about your mating."

“Oh,” she says, sitting up straight in her chair and thinking it through. “Oh, I see.”

I nod along with her, seeing the point now. Because after we discovered that the priestesses of my mother’s temple in the city had been infiltrated by the Cult, it has been shut down for the moment. Besides, that temple was more of a place of worship than a true conduit for my mother – the closest of those temples, where priestesses live in dedication to her and are able to truly call on her presence, is hundreds of miles away.

And if Cora wants to go and ask her questions?

We either have to do it now, before the coronation begins? Or she has to wait and that waiting could take quite a long time.

I purse my lips, wondering what the right choice is. Because what matters more now – answering my sister’s big questions? Or chasing down the man who tried to kidnap my son?

Chapter 383 – Road Trip

Ella

I watch Cora struggle with her choice, biting her lip and trying to figure out how she feels. My heart goes out to her now, because I know that she thinks it is an impossible ask to tell us that she wants to put a coronation on hold so that she can visit a temple.

But suddenly, quite suddenly, it's all I want for her. Because Cora has been here for us through all of this – and she deserves answers to these questions. And I open my mouth to say this, but Sinclair beats me to it.

"I think we should go," he says, and I whip my eyes up to see him giving a casual shrug. "It will only take a few days," he adds, looking down at me to see how I feel. "And, quite frankly, we could...use a break before the madness begins again."

A little smile creeps over my mouth. "Would it," Cora begins, and then hesitates again. But we all wait, letting her find her voice. "Would it be safe?" she asks.

"We think it would," Roger says steadily at her side. "Xander's on the run, which means he's scrambling. He's an old man and we took out the forces that he was using to physically attack us. Even if he's working to get more, we think that we have...at least a small window of time."

"We would have to move quickly and quietly," Henry adds, more cautious now than he's been in the past – I think spooked, still, by the disastrous results of our last plan. "No planes or anything flashy – just...a small, anonymous family trip."

I turn my attention back to Cora, wanting to know what she thinks. But she's still sitting perfectly still and quiet, clearly putting her thoughts together.

"I can't ask you to do this," she says after a long, quiet minute. "I – we need to get the coronation going, to keep us all safe."

"You don't have to ask us to do it, Cora," Sinclair answers quietly, and I turn my eyes up at my mate. "We're telling you we want to do it. Right?" he looks at me now and I nod eagerly.

"Honestly, Cora," I say, leaning forwards her. "It's what I was thinking. I think it's right – I think we should go."

Roger says nothing, simply staying steady at Cora's side, letting her make up her own mind. But she just continues to shake her head. "But there's already so much to do here." She sighs, putting her head down in her hands for a moment as she collects her thoughts.

“The Cult, and the priests, and Xander – it was already a distraction from the aftermath of a war with the humans that has been terribly complicated. There is still so much work to do here, and Ella,” she looks up at me now, “we could be spending this time going to the refugee camps, actually helping people, now that we have the gift -“

My face falls when I realize that she’s right. That there is so much to do here, that it’s perhaps selfish to consider this possibility –

“Two days, Cora,” Roger says quietly next to her, taking her hand. “Two days, and then you can come back and save the world, and take on those problems and surely everything else that’s going to come along with them. But,” he gives her hand a little squeeze, “it would be okay to take two days. You deserve that. You’ve earned that.”

And I find myself nodding, agreeing. Because as I consider what the rest of our lives are going to look like...it’s going to be a lot of dedication to the people of this nation, of this world. And it will make me so happy to do that work – to help people.

But Cora is one of the people I want to help. She deserves it as much as anyone else. Plus, she’s my sister. And that has to count for something.

“Let’s go, Cora,” I say, leaning forward and giving her an encouraging smile. “Two days.”

She bites her lip and I can see that she’s tempted, even if she hasn’t given in yet.

“Would it help,” Sinclair continues, cocking his head to the side, “if I told you that we’d be going in a very fancy RV? With a real bed that you and Roger could sleep in, and not be wedged together in a hospital bed?”

Cora sits up straight at the idea. “You should have started with that,” she says, her eyebrows going up almost to her hairline. “I was sold at ‘real bed.’ Let’s do it.” And then a little smile creeps onto her face.

I let out a little cry of joy, throwing up the hand that’s not holding my baby to my chest. “Yes!” I shout, laughing now. “Road trip! This is so exciting! I’ve never been on a road trip in my life!”

“Really?” Sinclair asks, smirking down at me, pleased to see me so excited.

“Really!” I cry, looking excitedly between him and Cora. “This will be so cool! I’ve always wanted to go on a road trip! This will be the best vacation ever!”

“Well,” Henry says, laughing a little along with me. “It’s not precisely a vacation -”

“Nope!” I say, getting to my feet, carried away a little by my excitement. “We get two days,” I say, holding up two fingers to everyone in the room. “Two days before we dedicate our lives to helping the people of this world, and destroying our enemies, and running a nation. So if I get two days respite from all of the awful things that have been happening to us lately? They’re going to be the best two vacation days we’ve ever had!”

And then I’m laughing and dancing around the room, holding Rafe up in the air and asking him if he’s excited for his first vacation. I think my joy is infectious, though, because when I turn back to my family everyone is smiling, laughing a little, and chatting as we start to make plans.

Cora bites her lip again, but I can tell it’s with excitement this time as I move to her side, swooping down to give her a kiss on the cheek. “I’m so excited,” I say, grinning down at her. “You’re going to get to talk to mom! And get all of the answers to your questions!”

“I know,” she says, a hesitant excitement building in her now. “I just hope...well, I hope that she tells me what I want to hear, you know?”

“She will,” I say, smiling and placing a hand on her cheek. “Things are going to start looking up for us, sis. I can feel it. Now let’s get packed! Because we’re going on a road trip!”

And then I whoop again and throw my hand up in the air. Sinclair laughs as he comes to my side, his phone already in his hand as he starts putting the plan into action. ”

Come on, trouble,” he says, glancing at me. “Let’s go get packed – we’re going to have to move fast now if we want to make this work.”

“Okay,” I say, and then I glance back at Cora, wanting to make sure she’s all right before I go. But she waves me off, standing up to start making her own plans with Roger. Henry, likewise ready to get started, starts to roll for the door to make his own plans. Excited, I take Sinclair’s hand. “So, where do we get an RV?” I ask, pleased.

“You leave it to me,” he says as we head out of the room and start to walk down the hall. “You go pack our things and I’ll get our ride.”

“Okay,” I say, heading for our little room. But before we part ways, I turn sharply and tug at his hand, making him pay attention to me for just one more moment. “That offer of the big bed,” I say, looking up at him with a frown. “That had better be on offer for me as well. Because if I have to squeeze into another single bed with your gigantic self for one more night,” I add, pointing a finger into his face, “I am out.”

He laughs and grabs my accusing finger, placing a kiss on the tip of it before turning away from me and heading down the hall. “Your wish!” he calls over his shoulder. “My

command!"

"Damn straight," I mutter, smirking and watching him as he walks away from me. And then I sigh a little in excited content. Because my mate has stolen me two days away from this crazy world and I couldn't be more excited for this trip.

Chapter 384 – Long Miles

I gasp a few hours later when I see the gigantic RV that rolls up out front of the clinic.

“Seriously?” Hanks says, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at it, somewhere between impressed and revolted by the extravagance. “The gas mileage on that thing must be horrible

“Ohhh,” I say, laughing and swatting him on the arm with one hand, the other holding Rafe’s carrier where he’s already bundled and ready. “Don’t spoil my fun, Hank – you’re just jealous because you’re not coming.”

“Yes,” Hank murmurs, giving me a good-natured side eye. “Yes, there’s absolutely nothing I want more in the world than to be cooped up in a tin can with Roger and Cora for forty-eight hours. You’re right.”

I laugh when I consider this point, stepping closer to Hank and wrapping him in a one-armed hug that he’d probably rather avoid. But we’ve grown a lot closer in the past few days, working together, and well? If he’s going to be my friend, then he’s going to have to get used to a great deal of affection.

“You’ll be all right here when we’re gone?” I ask, pulling away.

“Ah, don’t worry about me,” Hank says with a little smirk and a shrug. You guys have bigger things on your plate.”

“When I come back,” I say, looking at him seriously now, hoping he understands how much he means to me – to all of us. “We’re going to do big things, okay? Help a lot of people. With the gift, and with your skills.”

“That’s all I want, Ella,” Hank says seriously, giving me a nod and a little smile that’s likely the most emotion I’m going to see from him anytime soon. But then his eyes drift to Cora and Roger who come through the door of the clinic and I know...well, I know that what Hank says about this being all he wants is a little bit of a lie. And my heart aches for him because I know now, for sure, that he’ll never get it.

I purse my lips a little, trying not to let him see me pity him. But he catches me in the act.

“Don’t,” Hank sighs, shaking his head at me. “I’m good, Ella. I really am.”

“I know,” I say, putting a hand out to his shoulder. He gives me a sad little smirk before turning back into the clinic – intent, clearly, on busying his mind so that he doesn’t have to think about her. Cora and Roger call brief goodbyes to Hank before coming to my side to admire the RV.

"It's huge," Cora says, her eyes wide.

"It's not so big," Roger says with a shrug. But Cora and I both roll our eyes at him as Sinclair parks the vehicle and climbs out of the driver's seat. Cora and I didn't grow up with much as kids, and we've certainly never been on a vacation like this – with a whole fancy vehicle reserved just for us.

I'm so incredibly excited I can barely contain it.

"Ready?" Sinclair asks, opening the door to the living compartment of the RV and pushing a button that activates a little metal platform that lowers itself to the ground so that Henry can wheel onto it.

"Yes!" I say, taking Cora's hand and pulling her with me to Sinclair's side. "Is it nice? Are there enough beds? Is there a kitchen? How do you -"

Sinclair just laughs at me, shaking his head as Henry maneuvers himself onto the lift. "Just go in, Ella," he says, nodding towards the door with the short flight of stairs. "Explore. Let yourself be surprised."

I eagerly do as my mate suggests, hurrying up the steps and gasping with excitement again as I look around. It's absolutely gorgeous inside, and everything is so shiny –

"Oh, wow," Cora says, her eyes as wide as mine as she climbs in after me. "This is... amazing."

My sister comes with me as we wander around the space, admiring the gorgeous kitchenette with its white leather table space, the little living area that comes after that, the adorable, cleverly designed bathroom that makes the most of the minimal space allotted to it. But I really gasp when I see the bedroom tucked away in the back –

with its king-sized bed, and plush downy linens.

"Oh my god," I say, quickly unbuckling Rafe from his carrier and groaning as I sit down with him on the bed which is as comfortable as it looks. "Oh, I missed big beds –"

"Um, Ella," Cora says, smirking at me from the doorway. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Huh?" I ask, confused.

"That's my bed," she says, her wicked smirk growing.

"What!?" I gasp, and then I groan as I remember Sinclair's promise to her – a big bed for

her and Roger. “Well then where do I sleep?!”

“Out there,” Sinclair says, appearing in the doorway behind Cora. “The couches transform – one into a queen for me and you, and the other into a twin, which my dad will take – ”

“Noooo,” I moan, tossing my head back and settling deeper into the pillows. “Can I sleep in here with Cora and Roger? I won’t take up much space – you can take the baby and -”

“No chance in hell,” Roger declares, pushing past Sinclair into the room with little travel bags filled with his and Cora’s stuff which isn’t much, considering we haven’t had access to any of our possession since we left the bunker. Roger places the bags on the ground and snaps his fingers at me when he straightens up. “Up, Ella. That’s my bed.”

“No, I need it,” I whine, pouting at him.

“Ella,” Cora says, unable to keep the mischief out of her eyes even though she pretends she’s serious. “I’m pregnant. I need my rest.”

I sigh then, glaring at her for playing the pregnancy card.

“Fine,” I growl, making them all laugh as I huff my way back to the living room. “But this queen-sized bed better be comfortable,” I say to my mate as I pass him.

“Fit for a Queen,” he says, following me back into the main living area of the RV and giving Roger and Cora a moment alone.

To my surprise, Henry has already settled himself at the front of the RV, locking his chair into a space where the passenger seat should be. He gives me a little wave before turning back to a set of maps. I take a moment to admire the ingenuity of the vehicle and how cleverly it’s been made accessible for someone in a wheelchair.

“You two ready?” Sinclair says, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and looking down at Rafe, still in my arms and looking happily around at all of the bright lights.

“Yes,” I say, meaning it as I give him a big smile. “How long do you think it will take to get there? To the temple?”

“We’ll probably get there sometime tomorrow,” Henry calls over his shoulder and Sinclair nods in agreement. “Oh,” I say with surprise. “So where will we sleep tonight?”

“A campground somewhere,” Sinclair says with a shrug. “We have to see how far we get. It’s part of the adventure, and part of staying anonymous. No reservations for people to know where we’ll be staying.”

“Do you think,” I say, glancing out the windows. “That we’ll be followed?”

“I don’t,” he says, placing a finger beneath my chin and turning my face back to him. “It’s all right, Ella,” he says softly. “You can relax. Enjoy it. You’ve worked so hard lately – let me... let me give this to you, as well as to Cora.”

And a soft smile finds my face as I realize that Sinclair’s willingness to take this trip was about ensuring that Cora and Roger get the answers that they need, but that it’s also about me. About us. About giving us a minute as well to just...breathe. To have a nice couple of days.

I nod to him, letting him know that I understand.

Roger comes out of the bedroom area, Cora close behind, and he claps his hands, asking if it’s time to get started. I settle myself down on one of the little grey couches, eager to see what happens next, and Cora sits next to me, likewise buzzing with excitement.

Then, as one, our mates turn towards the front of the RV and take a step towards the driver’s seat.

“Um,” Sinclair says, putting out a hand and settling it on Roger’s chest, stopping him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To...drive,” Roger says, as if it’s obvious. Sinclair lets out a sarcastic little laugh. “Funny,” he says, gesturing towards where Cora and I sit with his other hand. “Go play checkers with your mate, Roger.”

“How can I do that, Dominic,” Roger says, his voice deadpan, “it will be very distracting to be playing a game while I’m driving.”

And then the two of them start to bicker about who is going to drive, making Cora and I dissolve into laughter.

“Do you think there’s really checkers?” I ask her, looking around at all the clever little compartments around me.

“I hope so,” she says, starting to open a drawer which I gasp to see is indeed stacked with a bunch of games – most of them magnetic so that we can indeed play them while we’re driving.”

Because I’m going to need a distraction if we’re going to listen to that all day,” she says, nodding towards the brothers who still continue to fight.

It takes them about fifteen minutes to come up with a driving plan that they both find equitable and Roger sits down next to Cora in a huff, letting Sinclair take the first shift.

“Red or black?” Cora asks him with a smirk, unfolding the board and placing it between them. “Black,” he sighs, scowling a little and looking jealously at his brother in the front of the RV.

“Poor baby,” Cora coos, running a hand through Roger’s hair. “Don’t worry – you can have your turn soon.”

His scowl deepens, making me laugh, and then – with a lurch – we’re on our way. My stomach twists with excitement. A road trip! I can’t even begin to think of anything I want to do more with my family right now.

“I get winner,” I declare, leaning back against the cushions with Rafe sitting happily in my lap as Roger and Cora begin to play. I’m looking forward to this relaxing little vacation, but deep down?

I’m most excited about Cora getting answers to her questions. Soon, I think, my stomach giving an excited little twist. Soon we’ll know the answers to so many mysteries about this baby.

Mysteries I’m absolutely dying to have solved.

Chapter 385 – The Long...Long Road

Ella

It takes me just a little over an hour to realize that...I hate road trips.

“Oh my god,” I murmur to Cora as the vibrations of the gigantic RV continue to shake through us, making poor Rafe grumble uncomfortably. “Is it night yet? Can we stop?”

“You’re being a baby, Ella,” my sister replies, looking up at me with a smirk, jumping her red king over three of Roger’s black checkers and capturing them. “It’s fun!”

“You’re only having fun because you’re kicking Roger’s ass for the third time at that game,” I murmur, sighing as I glance out the window.

“Seriously,” Roger sighs, leaning back against the white leather of the kitchenette’s booth. “You should quit that, Cora. For Ella’s sake – she’s trying to enjoy herself.” He runs a frustrated hand through his hair, staring at the board.

“Yes,” Cora replies, laughing. “For Ella’s sake, I’ll go easy on you.”

“I just thought it would be prettier,” I sigh, looking out the window at the endless highway miles. “Like, purple mountains majesty. Fruited plains. Etcetera.” Instead, it’s just hour after hour of looking at cars, and asphalt, and the sad little pine scrub that borders the highways.

“Maybe when we get further out,” Cora offers, hopeful. “Nah,” Roger replies, making his next move on the checker’s board. “After the forest it’s all corn for days.”

I groan, leaning my head back. “I hate corn.”

“No, you don’t,” Cora chides, instantly making her next move on the board and capturing two more of Roger’s pieces. He gasps in protest and then slumps back again.

“How are you doing this,” he murmurs, studying the board. “Are you a witch?”

“Maybe,” she says with a shrug. “Guess we have to ask mom.”

I smile at her then, bouncing my fussy baby in my arms. And I inhale a deep breath, silently ordering myself to cheer up because even if I decidedly do not like riding in the RV, I’m still excited to take this trip for my sister, to get her the answers she so desperately wants.

Eventually Cora and I retire with the baby to the bedroom where Sinclair suggests I might not feel the movement of the RV as much. The boys all stay together up front,

studying maps and discussing ridiculous things like terrain and gas mileage things. they find endlessly fascinating for some weird boy reason. But I shrug and leave them to it. Cora and I curl up in the incredibly comfortable bed and spend our time chatting, watching movies, and napping lightly with the baby between us.

It ends up being a wonderful day in the little sun-soaked room at the back of the RV, laughing and talking with my sister, reconnecting with her and with the peace that I've been missing from my life since that terrible day when those men broke through my window.

"Do you think it's all really over?" I ask her in a quiet moment as the sun starts to sink to the horizon.

Cora doesn't bother to ask me what I'm talking about – she already knows. "I don't," she sighs, telling me honestly. "I think...well, Ella, I think we picked mates with big lives. I think we're going to have to snatch at moments of peace whenever we have them because the next challenge is always coming. And that we're going to have to fight to make that peace in our lives, because...something is always going to try to steal it away."

I sigh, looking down at my napping baby, trailing a little finger down his belly. "Are we dumb?" I ask quietly. "Did we choose wrong? I mean – neither of them are our fated mates. We picked this...should we have chosen simpler lives?"

"You don't want a simpler life," Cora laughs, and I look up at her in surprise to see her smiling and shaking her head at me.

"What?" I ask, sitting up straight, "Cora, I was a nanny – I was ready to be a broke single mom, to live quietly alone with my baby.

"Nah," she says, waving a hand at me in dismissal. "That was just the start of your story, Ella, always. Yes, you were always going to be a mom," she says, cocking her head to the side, "but...you were never going to stop helping people. I think it kind of makes sense that you ended up being such a good pair for Dominic. He opens a door for you to help thousands when he is king, and I think that was always your fate."

"Huh," I say, considering what she's saying. And I guess...well, I guess I think she's right. That this was perhaps always the life I wanted, even if I want to pretend sometimes that I wanted a simple life.

"And also," she adds, her voice dropping lower. "I'm actually...I'm not sure if Roger isn't my fated mate," she says, considering.

"Really?" I ask, my eyes going wide. "But you're a human -"

"I know," she says, frowning. "But... Ella, this thing between us," she says, shaking her head. "It feels really big. I don't...know how to explain it except like that."

"Did you feel a mating bond snap into place?" I ask, curious.

"I don't know," she says, turning back to me. "But Roger said it first, when we were out in that rainstorm – that day when we had to stop at the roadside motel."

I grin at her, knowing what happened that day, and she blushes a little and rolls her eyes. But I lean forward eagerly, wanting to know. "What did he say?"

"That I was his mate," Cora replies, giving a little shrug. "But the way he said it so definitive. Not I choose you as my mate. Just...that I was."

"Wow," I say, impressed, a little jealous. I have no hesitations about Sinclair as my chosen mate, and I know that what's between us is far beyond anything he had with his own fated mate. But still – it's an experience I'll never have. "Well," I continue, "did you ask him about it?"

"No," she says, shrugging again.

"Why not?"

"Because," she sighs. "I...like the idea. I don't want him to tell me that I'm not." "Well, I'll go ask -" I say simply, scooching forward on the bed, ready to jump off.

"Ella!" she gasps, grabbing my arm.

"What?" I reply, looking at her wide-eyed.

"Stop meddling!" she laughs, tugging me back down. "That's between me and him!"

"And me now! Since you told me!"

Cora laughs, throwing a pillow at me. "Lay down, trouble," she growls, doing her best impression of Sinclair. I laugh and snatch the pillow out of the air. Then I do as she says, sighing as I lay down and reaching out to gently pull my little baby closer to me.

"Okay, I won't," I murmur, smiling up at my sister. "But you have to tell me as soon as you know. Do you think you'll ask mom?"

"Probably," she says, smiling contentedly. Then her face falls a little as she cocks her head at me. "Do you think you have a fated mate somewhere out there, Ella? Looking

for you?"

"Nah," I say, smiling down at my baby. "Not everyone gets one, they're pretty rare. So," I shrug, smiling down at my baby and leaning over to give him a little kiss on the head. "I think the Goddess gave me Sinclair, and he's more than I could ever ask for."

"Damn right I am," my mate says, coming into the room and leaning against the wall, smiling down at us. He and Roger switched driving positions about an hour ago at a rest stop where Cora and I picked up some more snacks. "What are you two talking about?"

Cora opens her mouth to bring up the fated mate question, but I interrupt, not wanting Sinclair to even have to consider it. "Who loves their Sinclair brother more," I say simperingly, smirking at him. "Me or Cora. We just can't decide, we're both so obsessed with you two -"

Sinclair growls playfully, coming swiftly to the side of the bed and laying himself down on it, fitting his body close to mine. "You'd better be winning, little mate," he murmurs, nuzzling me as he slips an arm around my waist and pulls me close. "I can't let Roger have this one." I laugh and assure him that I am indeed winning as his stubble rushes against my skin, tickling me and making me laugh.

Cora pretends to gag and stands up from the bed, snatching a bag of pretzels and heading for the door. "I'll be out here!" she says, waving to us over her shoulder. "Don't do anything weird in my bed!"

Then, as she disappears from the room, I half turn to my mate and wrinkle my nose at him mischievously. "Want to do weird stuff in her bed?" I whisper, trailing a finger down the length of his chest.

"Absolutely I do," my mate murmurs back.

Chapter 386 – By the Fire

The trip improves by leaps and bounds the moment we stop at the campground for the night.

“Finally,” I sigh, taking a deep breath of the fresh air as I climb down the steps of the RV, my baby curled in my arm and looking around him with bright and interested eyes. “It’s good to be on steady ground again.”

“Remind me never to take you on a boat,” Sinclair murmurs, coming down the stairs behind me. “If you didn’t like this...you won’t respond well to that.”

“Yes sir,” I say passively, smiling down at the baby, who frees one of his arms and reaches out into the cool evening air, clasping his fingers at a firefly who passes close by. I don’t mention that I liked the sea voyage to the desert much more than I liked this, even though the accommodations weren’t as nice.

“What about this?” Sinclair murmurs as he steps down the final step and comes to stand behind me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders. I smile as I lean back against his chest. “Is the forest an improvement?”

I look around our isolated campsite, lit with grey and blue tones in the dying light of the day. I smile at what I see, appreciating the cool air and the blinking light of the fireflies that float lazily through the space.

“Yes,” I say with a decisive nod. “This will do quite well.”

“Good,” Sinclair replies, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek before releasing me and moving to a luggage compartment low on the RV, I watch as he opens it and begins pulling out camping gear chairs, a cooler, some bags with extra snacks and bug spray.

“Oh!” I say, surprised by it all as my mate begins to set it all up around a burned-out ring where a fire goes. “Oh, we’re very prepared.”

“Of course we are,” Roger says, climbing out of the RV with Cora behind him. When he reaches the ground, Roger flicks the switch that prepares Henry’s little elevator. “We’re always ready to go glamping in this family.”

I laugh at the term, settling into a chair that Sinclair waves me towards, smiling down at the baby. “What do you think, Rafe?” I whisper to him. “Do you like glamping?” He gives a happy little coo in response and I laugh, grinning up at his father. “I think that’s a yes.”

“Kid has taste,” Sinclair says, winking at me as he continues his work. We’re all settled around a fire much faster than I thought was possible and I smile as I watch Sinclair and Roger set a little grill across it, apparently preparing to make us our dinner as well.

“They only cook,” Henry whispers, leaning over to Cora and I and giving us a smile, “when it’s outdoors. Otherwise, they’re not interested.”

“Not true!” Sinclair protests, his eyes still on the fire.

“Absolutely true!” Roger chimes in, making us laugh. “If I’m making food, it’s grilled. Otherwise I’m getting takeout.”

“Guess your baby is gonna eat a lot of hotdogs,” I murmur to Cora.

“And eggrolls,” she adds, sighing. Then she looks over at me from her chair next to mine. “You know I can’t cook either.”

I shrug. “Maybe we can make them hire us chefs,” I consider. She raises her eyebrows, pleased at the idea, and we both grin.

It continues like this long into the night the family gathered happily around the fire, talking about nothing and everything, chatting lightly about what we’ll be doing in our mutual future but not touching on any of the big, scary subjects that lurk behind the conversation. We all know that they’re there, after all – and we all simultaneously decide to leave them untouched for the moment.

Instead, tonight is just about laughter, and fun, and spending time together.

I moan a little as I bite into a smore that Sinclair hands me, the marshmallow burned to a crisp just the way I like it. “Oh my god,” I murmur, closing my eyes as I chew. “This is so good, I can barely stand it.”

“You’re dripping,” Sinclair laughs, you’re going to get marshmallow all over the baby – ”

“I don’t care,” I murmur, shaking my head and refusing to open my eyes as I take another bite. “He won’t mind -=”

Sinclair laughs again as he comes and lifts Rafe from my arms. I let him, wanting to be alone with my s’more anyway. Cora, Roger, and Henry laugh as well as Sinclair walks Rafe away from me, apologizing in a loud murmur for how messy and inconsiderate his mother is. I wave a hand at him, dismissing him and his words, knowing that he’s kidding anyway.

Regretfully, I finish my s’more and look around at my family, watching them quietly. Henry watches Sinclair and his grandchild while Cora and Roger sit close to each other, not talking but clearly connected in this peaceful moment.

"It's nice out here," Cora says, wrapping her arms around herself and smiling around at our dark camp. "I didn't think I'd like sitting outside in the dark by a fire as much as this."

"Something primal about it, isn't there?" Roger murmurs, raising a hand to play with Cora's hair as he smiles at her.

"Yeah," she says, looking up at the stars and then turning her head to look at Roger, beaming at him.

I can't help my own smile from crossing my face as I watch them. And then, as they stare at each other, I decide that that's my cue.

As quiet as I can, I stand up from my little camping chair and send a pulse down my bond with Sinclair. He looks up at me, curious and I nod my head first towards the RV and then towards Roger and Cora, who begin talking quietly. My mate follows my gaze and then nods his understanding. He walks to his father and puts a hand on his back, leaning down to speak a whispered word.

Then, one by one, as stealthily as we can – which is not very stealthy, considering Henry has to be lifted into the RV with a noisy platform – the three of us and the baby make our way back into the little mobile house, leaving Cora and Roger alone by the fire to have a moment to themselves.

"What do you think they're talking about," I say to Sinclair as he climbs last into the RV, pulling the door shut behind him, the baby still curled in his arms. I'm sitting in the little kitchen nook, peering out the window at Roger and Cora through the tinted window.

"Isn't that their business, little spy?" he says, coming to sit with me on the plush leather. Henry, perhaps wanting to give us our own moment, rolls his way back to the bedroom, making some excuse about wanting to watch some television, though we both know he doesn't watch TV.

"Yes," I sigh, looking up at my mate and reaching for my baby, who Sinclair passes into my arms. "But you know I always want to know."

Sinclair laughs. "Do you know," he murmurs, slipping his arms low around me and pulling the baby and I warmly against him, resting his chin on my shoulder so that he too can look out at Cora and Roger, "I never cared as much about the details of my brother's love life until you came along."

"Why not, I say, still peering out at them. "Roger's hot. He probably has had lots of interesting girlfriend drama

"Roger's hot?" Sinclair asks, his body going stiff behind me, just a little bit.

“What?” I ask, turning to him, confused now.

“You think my brother’s hot?”

I burst out laughing, lifting a hand to my mate’s face. “Dominic,” I say, shaking my head at him. “Your brother is hot. It’s an ostensible fact – not my opinion.”

“Still,” he growls, pulling me tighter. “I don’t like to hear you say it.”

“Oh?” I inquire with a smirk. “And what would you have me say instead?”

“That all men, beside me, are nonexistent. Or disgusting swamp creatures – ”

I burst out laughing again at this, tilting my head back.

Sinclair laughs along with me and I tuck myself even closer to him, grinning up into his face. “I promise,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to his mouth, all men, next to you, actually are disgusting swamp creatures. But, for Cora’s sake, I’m glad Roger’s hot.”

Sinclair’s chest hums for a moment as he considers my point but then he nods sharply, finding this acceptable. I quirk my head to the side, a question coming to me quite suddenly. “Do you think Cora’s pretty?”

“What?” he asks, pulling back a little, aghast.

I grin. “It’s just a question.”

“Ella,” he says, looking at me as if I’m strange and shaking his head. “I’ve – never even thought about it. I don’t look at her that way.”

“Really?” I ask, curious. “You don’t look at other women?”

“No,” he says, shaking his head seriously. “It’s not it doesn’t even cross my mind anymore. All of those parts of my focus are directed solely at you. It doesn’t even enter my mind to think if I’m attracted to anyone else – it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh,” I say, raising my eyebrows, surprised and pleased. Then I smile at him. “Well, that’s very nice to hear.”

“You’re it for me, Ella,” Sinclair murmurs, putting a hand on my cheek and turning my face up to him. Then, quite softly, he presses a kiss to my mouth. “You’re the only one who matters, who will matter, ever.”

“Same for me, my love,” I whisper back to him, and then I kiss him again, for real. The kiss sweeps through me – fast, hot. My heart rate increases and I find myself panting much sooner than I thought I’d be.

“Shit,” Sinclair sighs, glancing around the very public room in which we’re sitting.

“Dream state?” I suggest, grimacing a little. Because I think we both know that we’d rather...

“Yes,” he sighs, standing up to rearrange the furniture in the living area and turn it into a little bedroom, though he glances with a grimace at the little twin bed where we know his father will sleep. “Though next vacation,” he says, sending me a frustrated glance, “we’re going alone. And there will be doors.”

“Agreed,” I say with a sigh. And then I spend the new few minutes getting the baby ready for bed while my mate works, every second regretting the promise we made to let Cora and Roger take the bedroom.

Chapter 387 – What Kind of Mate?

Cora

“They think they’re being subtle,” I whisper, smiling as Sinclair closes the RV’s door behind him, the last to “disappear” from our little circle around the fire.

“I’m not complaining,” Roger murmurs, slipping an arm around my shoulder. “Are you, little mate?”

I laugh lightly at the nickname, shaking my head at him. “It still doesn’t work, Roger,” I say, leaning closer to him, though the camping chairs make it hard to get as close as I’d like to be. “I’ve told you before – I’m not little.”

“Sure you are,” he replies, grinning at me.

“I’m not!” I say, laughing. “Ella’s the little one,” I continue, “I’m tall – I’m not -”

“You’re little to me,” he interrupts, moving his chair closer so that he can tuck his face between my neck and my shoulder, breathing deeply in – I think savoring the way that I smell, which sends a little thrill through me. I lower my own head and breathe in Roger’s own unique scent, letting it flood my senses.

God, does he even know how good he smells? Though he probably does – his sense of smell far outstrips mine.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Little to you?”

He lifts his head so he can look into my face, only inches from me now. “You’re little to me, Cora,” he replies, in that you’re...I don’t know. Quite precious. The way I think of you – I don’t know, I don’t want you to be insulted, but I think of you as...very small,”

“What?” I ask, confused, “why?”

“Because,” he says seriously, shrugging a little, “you’d have to be very tiny, to make a home out of my heart,” he says, tapping lightly at his chest. “As you have done.”

A broad smile stretches across my face and I laugh a little, even though I’m deeply touched at what he’s said. “Really?” I ask. “That’s what you think of me?”

“Mmhhh,” he says, turning his head a little and considering me from different angles. “My little mate, who I carry around all day in my heart. Even when you’re not physically around I keep you in here. I talk to you, send all kinds of messages. Tell you little jokes.” you I grin. “Do I think they’re funny?”

He nods, smiling at me. "Always."

Slowly, I shake my head. "Then it must be a tiny imposter," I joke, starting to laugh. "Because if it was me, she'd be telling you to get some new material –"

He laughs, growling a little and grabbing my arm, tugging me closer. "Get your ass over here, little mate," he snarls playfully.

"No!" I laugh, resisting and eyeing the flimsy camping chair he's sitting in. It barely looks like it can hold his huge werewolf form, let alone both of us. We'll break the chair!"

"Break it," he murmurs, still pulling me closer and making me laugh. "Sinclair's rich – he'll buy another."

"No," I say, standing up and tugging myself out of his grasp a little. "I have a better idea," Roger scowls, but he lets me go – watching me as I move to the camping supplies and pull out a couple of blankets. He continues to watch as I

spread two out before the fire and then gesture towards them, another blanket tucked under my arm. "Better," he concedes, standing up for a moment and then sitting gracefully

down in the middle of the blankets, pulling me down into his lap as he does so. "Much better, clever little doctor mate."

I take a moment to place my hands on Roger's face for a second, looking seriously at him before bringing my mouth to his and kissing him, letting myself sink into it, hoping – quite desperately that he knows just how – much I love him.

Because we fight, and we tease – But god, god how I love this man. All of him every arrogant, swaggering, adorable, sweet bit of him –

Roger's arms tighten around me as he kisses me back, taking deep breaths as he does so like he's finally home, like he's been waiting to do this all day. And I smile, thinking that...perhaps he knows, a little bit. Even if we don't have a mating bond that we can both feel, that we can pass messages along, like Ella and Sinclair do.

I break the kiss after a few moments, resting my head against his chest as he keeps his arms wrapped tight around me. And we're quiet for a little bit, staring at the fire, just... happy to be here with each other. Happy to have this quiet moment.

"Roger," I say quietly, thinking back on Ella's conversation we had earlier.

"Hmm?" he says, inviting me to ask whatever question is floating through my mind.

“Do you think I’m your mate?”

“Um,” he says, laughing a little, “ Yeah, Cora,” he says, as if it’s a stupid question, “I think we’ve made that pretty clear – ”

“No,” I say, turning to look up at him a little, to let him know that I’m serious. “Do you think I’m your...your mate mate. Like...fated mate. Instead of chosen.”

“Oh,” he says, his eyebrows raising a little. Then he grins at me and laughs. “ Wait, you seriously don’t know?”

I frown at him, confused – I hadn’t known there was something to know.” What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t feel it?” he says, turning his head and watching me curiously.” That day out in the forest, in the rain, outside the motel?”

My frown deepens as I start to get frustrated. “Feel what?” I ask.

He laughs then, a real laugh, a big one that shakes his whole frame. “Cora,” he says, looking back at me with a gentle smile. “You’re my mate. Truly. Fated, done deal. I’ve suspected it for a while for a long time, even though... well, I also denied it for a long time, because I didn’t think my mate could be a human. But I knew for absolute sure that day when you ran like an idiot out of the motel – ”

“Hey!” I protest, slapping his chest, “I was really upset!”

“I know,” he murmurs, nudging me with his nose. “But you were also being really dumb. Anyway I knew for sure, because that’s when it snapped into place. You and me, Cora? We’re end game. At least, on my side. But,” he considers me again, putting his thoughts together. “It should have snapped in for you at the same moment. You didn’t feel it?”

“No,” I sigh, disappointed. “I didn’t feel...anything ‘snap.’”

“Well, then mine will have to be enough for both of us,” he says easily, drawing me close and starting to lay kisses across my cheek, my jaw, down my neck.

But I’m still disappointed and jealous. It just feels unfair sometimes – the rest of my family gets to feel these intense emotions and I’m missing out on them.

“I almost laid you down and fucked you right there in the forest, Cora” Roger growls softly in my ear, distracting me. “It was very...intense. It was a nightmare, having to carry you all the way back to bed -”

“We would have drowned,” I laugh, pulling back a little so I can see his beautiful face, wrinkling my nose at him.

“I probably would have died happy and said it was worth it,” he murmurs, shrugging.

“Well, that would have been disappointing,” I scold. “Trading decades of sex for one very damp experience? I’m starting to doubt your judgment here, Roger.”

“Hmm,” he considers, tightening his arms and pulling me close against him, one of his hands tracing down the length of my spine. “Maybe we need to experiment. Maybe the rain really was the problem, but the experience in the forest...”

I glance around at our whereabouts and start to laugh, seeing where he’s going with this as Roger leans me back, trying to lay me out before the fire.

“Roger!” I hiss, glancing towards the RV. “Seriously, they’re right in there! They’ll see!”

“Oh come on,” he growls, pulling the third blanket over us to give us a little privacy. “No one’s watching -”

“Have you met Ella!? Of course she is!”

Roger laughs, shaking his head as he lowers me to the ground and lays the length of his body next to me, curving his shoulders over top of my chest so that he can lower his face until his lips are so close to mine I can feel his breath against me.

“I’m not thinking about Ella right now,” Roger says, nudging me with his nose. And then he slides a hand under my shirt, across the skin of my stomach, moving upwards. “And I’d prefer it if you weren’t either...”

I laugh, leaning my head back and giving in to him as Roger kisses my neck. “Let me show you,” he murmurs, “some of the things I wanted to do that day...”

And, taking a deep breath and covering my eyes with one hand – hoping to hell that Ella and Sinclair and Henry have gone to bed – I let him.

Chapter 388 – Good morning, Cora!

Ella

“Really, Cora?” I say, nudging my sister with my toe. I shake my head at my sister’s naked sleeping form, pressed against her mate under the single little throw blanket that’s tossed over both of them. Seriously, how are they not freezing?

“Auntie Cora is going to be so embarrassed,” I whisper to Rafe in my arms, who smiles at me and makes me laugh. “We are never going to let her live this down, are we, little baby!?”

Cora blinks awake then, looking blearily around her as she lifts her head. Roger is still senseless to the world, fully asleep beside her.

“What?” Cora murmurs, still looking around for a moment before glancing up at me and the baby. Then, as reality snaps back to her, she gasps and clutches the blanket tight to her chest.

“Morning, sister,” I say, smiling wickedly down at her. “Missing something?” And then I pull her bra out from behind my back.

“Ella!” she gasps, reaching for it, though I pull it away from her.

“What!” I laugh, enjoying every second of this. “It’s not like you were keeping it safe – I found this ten feet away, tossed at the foot of the RV! It’s the first thing I saw at the bottom of the steps!”

“No, you didn’t!” she growls in response, reaching for it again.

“Did too!” I laugh, tossing it to her now and shaking my head with glee. “Soooo,” I tease, “did you guys have a good nighttttt?”

Cora just glares up at me as she struggles to get her bra back on without dropping the blanket. After she closes the clasp behind her back she smacks Roger on the ribs; he wakes with a gasp as she glances anxiously towards the RV.

“Wake up,” Cora hisses. “Put your damn pants on before everyone sees -”

“Oh,” I say, still grinning gleefully at him. “Everyone’s already seen, sis. No reason to be ashamed now.”

Cora glares up at me, blushing hard. “Hey, Ella,” Roger says, sitting up and giving me a wide grin, completely unabashed to have been found naked and in a compromised position with my sister. “Is there any coffee?”

“There is!” I say, giving him a wide false grin. But then I let it fall instantly from my face, shifting into a glare.”

But none for you.”

“What!?” he asks, frowning. “Why?” Cora ignores the conversation, reaching for the scattered pieces of her clothing and pulling them on as discreetly as she can.

“Because!” I exclaim. “If you two were going to go all Survivor on us and sleep out here, you could have at least told us so that we could have taken the big bed!”

“No way,” Cora says, standing now in her bra and underwear and tossing the blanket over Roger to cover him up. She points a finger at me before walking a few feet away to grab her jeans. “I told you I don’t want you and Sinclair doing weird things in my bed.”

“You abandoned the bed!” I exclaim. ” The bed is up for grabs! I now claim the bed!”

“Nope!” she shouts over her shoulder, stumbling a little as she steps into her pants and starts to pull them up. “We have dibs forever dibs on the bed, whether we want to use it or not.”

I gasp at her, appalled at her selfishness, as Roger gets to his feet and wraps the blanket around his hips, tucking it in like a towel. “I’m getting coffee,” he murmurs, flashing Cora a grin before striding for the RV’s door, ignoring the pieces of his own clothing scattered around the fire. “It’s way too early for sister wars.”

I laugh at him and walk to Cora’s side, bending on my way to grab her tshirt and hand it to her. “So,” I say, smiling widely at her as she scowls at me and pulls her shirt over her head. “You never answered my question. Did you have funnnn last night?”

“Let’s just go,” she says, turning

towards the RV and ignoring me even though she can’t hide the happy smile I see on her face. “The sooner we get to the temple, the sooner we get you off this line of questioning.”

“You did!” I laugh, gleeful, chasing my sister to the RV’s door. “You totally did! Come on, Cora! Tell me everything!”

We have a very cheerful morning after that, with everyone teasing Roger and Cora, and Cora blushing and covering her face with her hands a lot, and Roger refusing to be ashamed and happily drinking his coffee while still dressed in nothing but the blanket wrapped around his hips.

Even Henry gets in on it, making Cora's blush deepen by patting her on the shoulder and telling her that it's okay that no woman can resist the sight of a Sinclair man in the moonlight –

Cora just groans deeply at that and stands up, stalking away to the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind her as we all laugh, perhaps a little too hard.

"All right, Roger," I say, still laughing and moving to take Rafe to the bedroom to change his diaper. "Joke's over – put on some damn clothes."

"No way," he says, lounging back against the white booth of the kitchenette and grinning at me, his coffee still in his hand. "Have you felt this leather against your skin? It's amazing-"

I just groan and roll my eyes, taking my baby away as Sinclair and Henry laugh, heading for the front of the RV so that we can get started.

As we drive, though, the mood in the RV gets noticeably darker. We all know, of course, that as the minute pass we're getting close and closer to the temple. And even though we're here for a good reason to visit our mother, to get some very necessary information – well? It's...tense. Because we don't know what that information is.

Cora grows the quietest, not even wanting to play any board games or cards as noon slips by. So I just take her hand, the baby curled in my other arm, and sit quietly with her. Waiting.

Sinclair starts to slow the RV at around two o'clock, glancing back over his shoulder. "We're close now," he informs us, his face impassive. I know that he's aware of the tension, but he lets Cora have her space to process her emotions.

Cora simply nods and we all sit quietly as Sinclair gets the RV as close as he can. But, unfortunately, the temple was designed to only be approached on foot something about a sacrifice to the Goddess? I don't know.

But either way, as we all step out of the RV at the base of a series of stone steps that winds slowly upwards and out of our sight through the forest. I know that each of us feels the tension.

"Will you be all right here, dad?" Sinclair asks quietly, putting a hand on his father's shoulder once Henry uses the lift to lower himself to the ground so that he can see us off.

"I'll be fine," he says with a small smile. Then he reaches out to touch Rafe's little foot,

hanging free from the baby carrier that's strapped to my chest. "Are you sure you don't want to leave the little one?"

"I don't think I'm ever letting him out. of my sight again, Henry," I say quietly, dipping my head to plant a little kiss on Rafe's head. Rafe gurgles pleasantly, blowing bubbles between his tiny pink lips. I can't help but smile when I look at him.

"Well," Henry says, folding his hands in his lap. "That, I understand. Good luck. I'll see you in a few hours."

We each bend to give Henry a kiss before we all turn towards the steps. I take Cora's hand as Roger starts to climb, taking the lead. Sinclair, on some Alpha instinct to protect the most vulnerable members of his pack, falls behind.

"You ready for this?" I ask.

"As much as I'm gonna be," Cora sighs, glancing at me with a little smile. And then, after she takes a deep breath, we start to climb the stairs on what promises to be a long, long hike.

Chapter 389 – The Temple

It is, indeed, a long climb. Cora and I are panting by the time we get to the top, and even though Sinclair took Rafe from me halfway through the hike I have to take a moment to catch my break when we pull ourselves up to the final level.

Roger has the indecency to look a little smug about the fact that he barely looks winded and Cora gives him a little shove on the shoulder as she works to take a few deep breaths and wipe the sweat from her brow.

Even as I work to bring my heartrate back down, I absolutely marvel at the sight before me.

The Goddess' temple, like the one in the city, is built completely with white marble. But unlike the one in the city, this one looks...ancient. Vines grow in ropes all over it, looking almost as if the structure is part of the forest itself, having grown up organically from it. The temple is tall and wide, the pillars in front drawing my eyes upward to the slanted roof which curls into a dome. At the very peak of the dome is a golden crescent moon, reaching up towards the sky, glinting in the bright sunlight.

"Wow," Cora says, standing straight next to me and likewise marveling at the temple. "Mom has some... impressive property."

"I know, right?" I mutter back, crossing my arms and shaking my head. If someone had told me, when I was a little girl sleeping in my creaky little orphan bed, that my mom lived here...

Well. I probably would have believed them.

But I was a very imaginative child.

"Um," Roger says, looking anxiously at Cora. "Shall we?"

I smile at him, seeing that he's eager to move on but also that he wants to give her room to process this experience. It's more intense for her than it is for him, and I think that it's very sweet that he realizes this. Roger really has come leaps and bounds as a person from when I first met him.

Sinclair comes to stand next to me and I grin at him and then turn to my baby, taking his hands and speaking to him quietly, asking him how he likes it here and if he's ready to meet his granny for real this time. Rafe claps and gurgles like he really is excited.

"It's like he understands sometimes," I say quietly, smiling up at Sinclair.

"Well," Sinclair says, grinning proudly down at his son. "He's very clever."

“Yes,” I say, leaning closer to kiss my baby’s forehead. “Yes, he is. The most clever baby the world will ever see -”

“He can keep that title for about...five more months,” Roger calls to us, crossing his arms over his chest with a smirk. Sinclair just laughs and shakes his head, letting it pass.

“Are you ready, Cora?” I ask, moving again to her side.

“I think so,” she says, giving me a nod and reaching for my hand. I give it, and, with another deep breath, the five of us begin to walk towards the temple. As we approach, a woman in dove-colored robes comes out of the front.

I hesitate for a moment, going still at the sight of those robes –

Because the last time I saw them-

But I feel Sinclair behind me, his hand warm against my back, and then a little pulse of comfort comes down the bond and I exhale, skipping forward a little to stay at Cora’s side.

Because he’s right. This is...this is not the same situation we were in before. This is different, and not every priestess we meet is going to try to take my baby away. Some of them, surely, actually serve my mother.

“Welcome,” the woman says, bowing a little and giving us a deep smile as we approach. “Daughters of the Goddess – you are welcome here. And you are right on time.”

Cora and I smile at each other and then look back to the woman. “Is she here?” I ask. The priestess smiles warmly at me but Cora turns to me with a frown. “Can’t you feel her?”

I blink at Cora for a second and then, as I realize what she means that she can feel our mother here already – I bite my lip, feeling a very deep grief.

Because I cannot feel her. I used up’ our bond – used the magic of it to unbind my wolf and my gift so that I could save my child, and Cora, and my mate. Cora realizes this very suddenly, her mouth making a startled “o” of concern, but I just shake my head and work hard to give her a smile.

“It’s okay,” I say, squeezing her hand. “I’m glad you can feel her for both of us.”

She nods to me, sympathetic, and then we both turn back to the priestess.

“Please,” the priestess says, smiling around at our whole party and taking a moment to let her gaze linger on the baby, admiring him. “Please, do come inside.”

And so, as a group, we follow the priestess into my mother’s temple. And as we go, I wonder if everyone’s heart is pounding as much as mine.

The temple, inside, is different than the ones that we’ve been in before.

While the desert temple was elegantly sparse, and the city temple was sweeping and impressive, this one is... cozy. The architecture is still bright and wide, but you can tell that women live here and treat it as a home. As I look around at the padded benches by the windows, at the well-loved books neatly tucked into alcoves and the little worn stick broom tucked into a corner, I decide quite suddenly that this is my favorite temple of all – and that I quite like it here.

The priestess does not pause in the middle of the large central room of the temple, the space beneath the dome, but instead leads us across it to a door at the back. Before she opens it, she turns to us with a warm smile. “Are you ready?” she asks, giving us a moment. to prepare.

Cora tucks her hair behind her ears and Roger comes to stand behind her, straightening his shoulders, his face very serious. He is, after all, about to be introduced to his mate’s mother as such for the first time. I smile at both of them as I reach for the baby, who Sinclair helps me unbuckle from the carrier. I don’t know why I do it, but somehow I want Rafe quite close to me as we go to see his grandmother. It feels ...right.

Then, once we’re all ready – and Sinclair has placed a warm hand on my shoulder – Cora nods to the priestess who opens the door and leads us inside.

We see her immediately, we all do-

The beautiful Goddess, standing at the far end of the room, glowing with the faint luminescence of moonlight. Her face breaks into a smile as we cross the room, her eyes flashing over all of us but focusing on Cora. I can’t help the tears that well in my eyes when I see her, as I study her form. And this time, as I look at her –

I see Cora all over her, in her face, in her expression, in the way she holds herself. Her hair is still like mine, but it seems like everything – everything else is my sister. How did I not see it before? Was I such a fool?

But as I think the thought, I dismiss it. Because she’s a Goddess, she’s divine. I think... she lets us see what we want or need to see in her.

As I think that my mother’s eyes move to me, and she smiles. And a few tears slip down

my cheeks as I smile back.

Then, as she should, she refocuses on Cora, moving forward to take her hands. "I'm so glad that you've come to see me, daughter. Finally."

"Hey," Cora says, tears slipping down her own cheeks, and then she laughs a little at her awkward start. "Hello, mom."

The Goddess reaches a hand to Cora's cheek, smiling at her.

"Um," Cora says, half turning to her mate. "You remember Roger, right?"

"I do," the Goddess says, laughing a little, the sound ringing in my ears like tinkling bells. "I'm glad, Roger, that you finally figured out what I meant in my message to you. By the desert."

"Yeah," he says, smiling and grimacing awkwardly at once as he runs a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry about that I...overthought it."

The Goddess' smile grows then and she reaches a hand out to him as well. "You will come with me," she says, turning towards another door, to an even more private room. "So that we may speak."

I step back then, towards my mate, but before she goes my mother turns to me and gives me a special smile. "Ella," she says warmly, and then her eyes shift to Rafe in my arms. "Thank you," she says, "for bringing my first grandchild to meet me. I had a glimpse of him before, of course, when you had him dedicated to me. But to see him now – in the flesh? It is...a gift."

"He's a gift," I whisper, holding my baby tight, tugging at the little bond I have with him and passing a great deal of love down it, so much that my baby looks up at me curiously and squeaks a little with his happy joy. I laugh and look down at him.

"As you are to me," my mother says, and I look back up at her, tears still dripping down my face. And I nod, understanding – finally – exactly what she means.

The goddess turns then, taking Cora and Roger's hands, leading them away. As the door closes behind them, I take a step backwards into Sinclair's arms, which I know were waiting to wrap around me.

"You okay, gorgeous?" he murmurs, bringing his lips down close to my ear to whisper the words.

"Yeah," I say, snuggling against him and dipping my head to kiss Rafe's. "I really, really

am, Dominic. I'm perfect."

"Yes," he sighs, kissing my own head now, just as I did Rafe's. "Yes, you are."

Chapter 390 – Conversations with the Goddess

Cora

My heart is pounding as I follow my mother into the chamber beyond, as Roger shuts the door behind us. My mother crosses the room with ease almost seeming to float. And then I blink in surprise as I realize that...she probably is floating. I mean, she's here – she's corporeal – but it's all a show, isn't it? She doesn't need to walk on her feet if she doesn't want to.

And something about that idea makes me laugh a little, easing my tension. My mother turns when she hears the sound of my laughter and smiles at me, at both of us, before sitting down before a tiny table with a tray of tea on it.

Roger and I cross the short room together, sitting down across from her. Thoughtfully, Roger pours two cups of tea, which is hot and smells minty and fresh. Then, hesitating at the sight of the third cup, he raises an eyebrow at

my mother. She laughs a little too, and I'm shocked to hear that her laugh sounds just like my own – the same rhythm, the same cadence. Something about that makes me smile.

"Yes, Roger," she says, nodding towards it. "I can't drink the tea – but it is nice to have an offering of it."

Nodding, Roger pours the cup of tea for the Goddess and slides it across the table towards her. Then he places a sugar cube in my teacup – knowing I'll want it and sits back in his chair, folding his hands in his lap.

"You've had a long journey, Cora," my mother says, looking at me warmly. "In more ways than one."

"Yes," I reply, smiling at the understatement in her words. And then I look down at my stomach and place my hands on it, shaking my head. "A journey that has raised...a lot of questions for us."

"I understand," she says. "It will bring me a great deal of joy to help you answer those questions, if I can."

"How much do you know?" I ask, looking back up at her, wondering if I need...like, do I need to tell her that I'm pregnant? Or...

"I know everything," she says, smiling at us. "Your lives are...open to me. As well as your hearts. I'm very pleased that you have found each other, little mates," she says, and I grin to hear her use Roger's pet term for me as if she's heard it before. Then she

turns to smile at Roger, “though I’d have preferred to see it happen sooner. I believe it would have saved you both a great deal of pain.”

Roger, to his credit, blushes and looks down. “Cora’s the smart one,” he sighs, glancing at me. “You should have sent her the vision.”

“She had other things to worry about,” the Goddess says easily. “You can’t leave everything to your mate.”

I laugh at this and Roger’s blush deepens, but he looks up at both of us with a determined look on his face, and we both know that he doesn’t mean to.

My mother turns to me then. “You wish to know?” she asks gently. “About the child?”

“Yes,” I breathe, leaning forward, eager. “Do you know? Is it...um...”

“Your child is perfectly healthy, Cora,” my mother says, looking down at my stomach. “I can hear the heartbeat now. Your child is strong.”

Roger and I both exhale in relief. I mean – we suspected that, but to hear it from a Goddess’ lips... Roger beams a wide smile at me and reaches out to take my hand. I slide my hand into his, palm to palm.

“Is – is my baby a wolf?” I ask, turning back to my mother, clutching Roger’s hand hard. “Your baby is like you,” my mother says, turning her head to watch me, curious.

And I bite my lip, glancing at Roger, who is unable to keep the crestfallen expression from his face. And in my disappointment I realize that we were both hoping very much that our child would be a wolf. Not that I would mind raising a normal human baby- but for him, for the child’s place in our family....

My mother laughs again, snapping our attention back to her.

“No, my daughter,” she says, smiling and shaking her head. “You misunderstand me. What I mean to say here is that...hmm,” she looks up at the ceiling as if thinking it through. “It is difficult to put into words...I do not use them often.”

My heart starts to pound again as she sorts through her thoughts.

“I believe the word that you would use for it,” she continues, still looking up, might be hybrid? Your baby is...both human and wolf?”

I gasp a little and Roger looks between us both, confused. “Really?” I ask, dropping Roger’s hand as I lean forward in my curiosity. “But you said – like me...”

The Goddess draws her eyes back down again and focuses on my face. ”

Lovely Cora,” she says, a smile spreading across her face, “your child is a cross between a human and a wolf, but it is not the first. You are.”

My mouth drops open suddenly as I stare at her, trying...trying to comprehend. And something about my confusion makes her laugh – not in a cruel way, but in the delighted way of a mother who watches her child discover a great new truth about the world.

“Wha- what do you mean?” I ask, my voice hardly louder than a whisper in my shock.

“You are human, Cora,” my mother says, leaning forward to make sure I understand. “Your body is human – your father was a human. But your mother I am the Goddess of the moon, , and of wolves, among other things.” She smiles at me as I begin to understand. “Your soul is that of a wolf, Cora,” she says quietly. “Can you not feel it?”

And I stare at her, shocked.

We’re all silent for a long moment before I stumble out my answer. “N-no,” I say, looking down at myself, and then closing my eyes and searching....searching –

But it’s nowhere.

“No,” I say again, devastated as I open my eyes and looking at my mother again. “Are you – are you sure? Is there some mistake?”

“I am sure,” she says gently, studying me. Then, she holds out one hand. ” Come to me, Cora,” she says, and I stand, going to her, taking her hand, gasping at the tickling, starlight feeling of her skin.

“Close your eyes,” she says softly, “let us see if we can coax your little wolf to show her face.”

And – unbidden, but knowing it’s right – I close my eyes, and let my mother’s energy rush gently through me, like a trickling stream, the sound of it in my mind like a calling... a summoning, a welcoming...

And suddenly, to my complete shock, I feel a dark corner of my soul shyly uncurl itself, opening one eye and looking hesitantly around, almost afraid to do so.

A little cry falls from my mouth as I recognize her instantly my sweet, quiet wolf, who has been here all along – but who has hidden herself away, confused, not knowing if she belongs, or where she belongs...

And I recognize her instantly, instantly as me as my own.

My little wolf raises her dark snout to the air at the continued sound of my mother's call, and then slowly, half- eager, half-scared, she starts to get to her feet.

Hey, I say within my mind, calling to her, reaching out a mental hand for her, eager for her touch.

She quirks her ears at the sound of my voice, but I see an eagerness slowly come into her expression. Hi, she says to me, awkward but...but wanting it. Wanting me. And slowly, I reach my mental hand closer to her, and run it slowly over the length of her soft brown fur.

I know you, she says, giving me a wolfish little smile. I like you. Can we run? She lifts her head and presses into the touch of my hand, letting her mouth fall open in eager joy.

Yes, I whisper back, laughing a little with my own joy. Yes, we can.

Chapter 391 – Questions Answered

Cora

My eyes flash open as I gasp, fascinated and thrilled at the having finally, finally met my wolf – who has been here all along –

My mother smiles warmly at me, but when I turn to Roger I only see shock on his face as he stares at me with wide eyes.

“Can you – can you sense her?” I ask, thrilled and curious.

“Um, yeah, Cora,” he says, looking me up and down in fascinated shock. “Can’t you feel mine?”

And I feel my wolf turn then, looking for him, and suddenly – frankly, like a slap in the face I feel Roger’s wolf standing right there on the other side of our bond, which snaps instantly into place –

I gasp, and my knees go literally weak at the sudden intensity of it –

Roger’s up in an instant, catching me in his arms before I can fall to the ground because... Because it feel like gravity shifts, suddenly, and what used to be down is now sideways, and at the center of everything now....

...is Roger.

“Hey,” Roger says, anxious, looking down at me as I stare up into his face, as my shy wolf comes forward to tap her nose hesitantly against his across our mating bond.

Roger’s wolf gives a great bay of joy and leaps forward, making my wolf skitter back a step. But he doesn’t stop, closing the distance instantly and nuzzling his body against her, nipping playfully at her shoulder, burying his nose deep in her fur –

My poor new wolf shies again for a moment – not from fear just...just because it’s all so new – and I feel Roger’s wolf respond, prancing around her with joy and letting her know with his body language that he’s thrilled she’s here –

And that he’s ready, whenever she is, to play. I can’t help the tears that pour from my eyes at this, as Roger laughs and hugs me close, as I...adjust myself, as best I can, to everything.

I give myself a few moments to cling to my mate my mate, my fated mate, because I know it to be true now in a deep, physical way – before I remember, of course, that my mother is here.

And that we're being incredibly rude. Slowly, even though I don't want to at all I push Roger away from me just slightly and turn back from her.

"I'm sorry," I say, wiping the tears from my face with the back of my hand. "I'm just -"

"It's all right, daughter," she says, smiling up at me from her place in her chair. "It does me good to see you so happy."

And then, holding Roger's hand tightly as we move back to our chairs, I do my very best to pull myself together.

"So," I say, hesitating, "um, does this mean that I'll be able to take Roger's mark?"

"Yes," the Goddess says, nodding. "It may take your human body longer to heal from it," she adds, giving a little shrug, "but your sister can help with that. And it will do you no harm."

"Will other humans?" I ask curiously, thinking suddenly of the vision we had of little baby Rafe, all grown up and finding his true love in a human girl. "Could they take a mark, if they wanted one?"

"They could," my mother says with a smile, "though...they might not find the joy in it, as wolves do. Your wolf, though, Cora, will crave it. She probably already does."

And inside me I feel the truth of it as wwolf steps closer to Roger's tall my wolf's side, pressing herself against him and looking up into his face. I grin, knowing that my mother is right, not needing to confirm.

Oh geeze, I think to myself, a little chagrined but unable to stop smiling. It is going to be...quite a struggle, trying to convince Roger not to give me his mark the moment we step out of this temple But, as much as I want it, I also want it to be special. Knowing my mate, he'll want to sink his teeth into me in the back of that RV – if not before but.... no. I want something more than that.

Quite suddenly, though, another question crops up in my mind. "Does this mean...um," I hesitate, also trying to find the words. "Will I be able to shift? Into my wolf?"

"I'm sorry, my darling," my mother says quietly, shaking her head. "Your spirit is that of a wolf, but your body is still human. It is incapable of the shift."

A little shudder of disappointment runs through me, but it's short lived. I've already received so, so much more than I had hoped from this visit.

“What about the baby?” Roger asks, interrupting my train of thought with a very important question. I perk up, curious, and am tickled to find that my wolf perks up too, her emotions reflecting my own. “Will the baby be able to shift?”

Roger does his best to hide his anxiety on this point, but I can see it in him as I look at his tense face. Roger wants, very badly, to be able to bond with his child on this point – as he did with his own parents.

“As you are the father of Cora’s child, Roger,” my mother says, a phrasing which I’m thrilled actually also answers questions for me that this is my child, and that no dark god was involved in some kind of strange impregnation scenario, as I had once feared “the child’s body is not entirely human, as Cora’s is. Your children’s experiences with their bodies and their wolves may be unique, but yes,” she says, beginning to smile, they will be able to transform, as you can.”

A huge sigh – almost a groan – of relief falls from Roger’s mouth as he hangs his head, his shoulders shaking with the intensity of it. I smile widely at my mate as he looks down at the floor with his eyes squeezed shut, trying to pull himself together – I’m just so pleased that he’ll be able to have this connection with his children, a connection he so deeply wants.

He looks up at me then, apology all over his face – “Cora,” he whispers, and I can see that he feels guilty, “I know it seems – I mean, I will love our children no matter what – but I just – ”

“It’s all right,” I say, reaching for his hand, which he gives me. “I get it,” I say, nodding and smiling. My wolf nudges his with her nose playfully, happy. “I really do.”

My mate exhales a sigh of relief and then we turn our attention back to my mother, though...honestly, I’m so happy that I feel guilty asking her for more.

“You two have a beautiful future ahead of you,” she says quietly. “It will bring me much joy to see it unfold.” And then, to my great sadness, she stands up. “My time runs short. Is there anything else I can answer for you, before I go?”

“Please,” I say, leaning forward on my chair and hesitating because...well, because it feels selfish. She smiles at me, though, inviting me to ask.

Still, I bite my lip. “Ella’s gift,” I say, the words coming out in a rush. “It can ...it can do such wonderful things in this world. I want to do more of that, to heal people, as she does. I know that she’s passed the gift to me before but – could you possibly – could I...”

And then I run out of words because... it feels just so, so terrible to ask for such an incredible gift, which should be freely given. I hang my head, ashamed.

But to my shock, my mother laughs, and suddenly I feel her fingertips under my chin, turning my face up to hers." You have your own gift, Cora," she says quietly, "already within you."

Chapter 392 – Do You Know what I Know?

Cora

“What?” I ask, confused. I – I have a gift? I quickly search for it within myself but...it's not there. I mean, I know how Ella's feels – she passed it to me before, I carried it – but there is nothing in me now that feels anything like that...

“Yours is different from your sisters,” the Goddess explains. “Ella's soul is that of a healer, and so that is her gift. Yours,” she smiles lightly, “reflects you. You've used it before,” she says, turning her head to glance at Roger with a little laugh. “I'm surprised you did not notice it then.”

“What?” I ask again, still baffled. But she turns to go and I grab for her hand. “Please,” I say, shaking my hand, “I don't understand -”

“Perhaps you should ask your sister for help,” the Goddess says with a shrug. “She can guide you to it, I think, as hers is already unlocked. But you already have your gift, Cora.” She assures me. She hesitates then before laughing a little, “as does your child.”

“What!?” I say for the third time, my mouth falling open now as I stare at her and then glance down at my stomach before looking back up into her face. “My child -”

“All your children,” she says simply, as if it's obvious, “will be gifted, as you are, as Ella is. As you, my daughters, are gifts to me – it is my gift to you, and to all of your children.”

“Whoa,” Roger says, sitting back in his chair and raising a hand to his head in shock. “All...all are kids are going to be magic?”

The Goddess laughs a little. “Each will be gifted,” she says simply, turning back to me. “And each gift will be unique, and will reflect each child's unique spirit. As yours does, as Ella's does. They'll all have pieces in common but -” she sighs happily now, shaking her head as if it's too complicated to explain. “You will see, Cora. I need not explain it all. Your children will show you.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“I love you,” the Goddess says, raising her hand and brushing my cheek with her fingertips. “Carry that knowledge your whole life. I will see you again,” she promises, and I cling to that prophecy just a little, “but until then carry my love.”

And then, as Roger and I watch, my mother passes through a door in the back of the room – a door that I swear was not there a moment ago –

And she's gone. Roger and I both stare at the door and then turn, slowly, to stare at

each other. And then, as I continue to stare at him, he starts to laugh – a low, delighted sound – as he gets up and crosses the small room to me, wrapping me tight in his arms and rocking me back and forth as he buries his head against my neck.

“I knew it,” he murmurs, still holding me tight. “I knew it was all going to be good news-”

“You did not,” I laugh, and finally as the shock leaves my system I feel myself filling with a deep and resounding joy in its place. “You were as anxious as I was!”

“Yeah,” he admits, his voice muffled against my skin, “but like... deep down. I knew it was going to be all right. You know?”

“Sure, baby,” I say, patting his back, letting him think it. But despite all of it, I can’t stop smiling. Inside me my wolf turns in a happy little circle, prancing around and shaking out her fur, getting used to the feel of her body moving freely.

Roger stands up a little straighter and grins down into my face. “This is so cool,” he murmurs. “The baby is going to be a wolf, and you have a wolf, and we have a mating bond -” he shakes his head, laughing, thrilled at it all.

“I know,” I murmur, smiling up at him and raising my hands to bury my fingers in his hair. “I feel – I feel crazy different, like expanded – ” my whole body has-

“Should we do it now?” he asks, interrupting me and looking down at my neck, raising his hand to start to tug at the collar of my shirt.

“Huh?” and then as I see him eyeing that soft place between my shoulder and my neck I burst into laughter and swat him away. “Ew, Roger! No!”

“EW?!” He says, his mouth dropping open a little bit – but we’re both too happy for him to actually be offended. We’re we’re just...so connected now 1- that the mating bond has snapped together on both ends. It’s like he can intuit my emotions and my meaning without even having to look at me, even listen to me.

“Why not?” He asks, and I can sense his mild disappointment.

“Because!” I say, slapping his shoulder playfully. “We’re in my mom’s house – there are people that live here! We’re not just going to like, throw down here in the back of the temple-

“Why the hell not?” he asks, looking at me like I’m crazy.

“Roger!” I gasp, “Absolutely not! I may be a wolf in spirit, but I was raised human. I have a little more decency than that.” And then as he wraps his arms around my waist and

pulls me closer, looking hungrily down at me, I start to laugh so hard that my whole body shakes. It takes him a moment but then he's laughing with me, and we pass our joy between ourselves down that bond, a cycle of it that makes me so happy I can barely breathe.

"Fine," he murmurs when we both calm down a little bit, after he presses his lips warmly to my mouth and kisses me, soundly, warmly, so that the love sweeps through me and makes me feel absolutely complete. "But as soon as we're alone – really alone, Cora..." he snaps his teeth at me, letting me know his precise intentions.

And I nudge him with my nose, just as my wolf does to his in the precise same moment. "You'd better," I whisper, feeling an intense hunger for his mark that I didn't feel before.

Slowly, Roger exhales and loosens his arms, his eyes drifting down my body to my stomach as he makes space between us. "So cool that the baby's going to have powers," he murmurs. And Sinclair and Ella are going to flip when we tell them that Rafe _."

But he freezes, suddenly, unable to finish his sentence. I feel his shock and awe down the bond before he looks up and whispers my name. into my face-

"What?" I ask my eyes going wide. It's not fear – nothing in his reaction tells me I should be afraid. But still...what.

And then, as he looks down at my stomach again, he passes me something down the bond – something I don't understand, something that doesn't have words...

And suddenly, quite suddenly, I become aware of...a new little connection inside of me. A link that has been there, but which I hadn't been aware of before...

My wolf quirks her head, turning towards it, curious. And then, as we both realize what it is, I gasp and she gambols forward in excitement. Our pup! She shouts in my mind, her heart and my heart both leaping with joy to feel it.

"The baby," I gasp – because now that my wolf is awake, I can feel the bond – feel it in the same way Roger could. "Is it... is it more for you now?"

"Yes," he murmurs, awestruck, looking back up in my face with wide eyes. "Yes, I can feel it so much more now – I think...I think as much as Dominic did, with Rafe..."

And I flush suddenly with joy to be able to give this to Roger, to be able to feel it myself, this wonderful, miraculous new connection...

I bite my lip with happiness suddenly as I explore the bod, prod it, connecting with my

little baby and saying hello, and realizing...

"Do you know what I know?" I whisper, my face alight again with joy. A thrilled grin bursts on Roger's face." Yes," he says quietly, his voice almost shaking with the joy of it. "I think I do."

"A boy!" I shout, laughing, throwing my arms around his neck as Roger catches me, and picks me up, and spins me around laughing and shouting with happiness.

"A little boy," he murmurs against my neck as I wrap my legs around his waist.

And then I take my mate's face in my hands, and I beam down at him, and I kiss his mouth for the joy of it. We stay like that for a long time, absolutely thrilled and more connected to each other and to our child – than we've ever been.

"Are you happy?" I ask him when I pull away, just an inch. But I smile, already knowing the answer.

"How could I not be, Cora?" he sighs in reply, looking up at me with such love in his eyes that I can hardly bear it. "This is everything. Absolutely everything."

And then he kisses me again, and I kiss him back, and with every passing moment I send a message down the bond to him with every beat of my heart:

I love you, I love you, I love you.

And he sends it right back.

Chapter 393 – Family Reunited

I get tenser and tenser as the minutes pass, and I can feel Sinclair behind me likewise desperate to know what's going on behind that closed door. A priestess comes by after a little while, offering us tea or seats, but we decline both because we're very aware that we're definitely not going to be able to relax until that door opens. Which it doesn't do for a very, very long time.

"What are they even doing in there?" I ask, especially when I hear a little muffled shout come through that makes me go quite still. Sinclair chuckles a little and I spin to look up at him, not understanding what he means –

But then, when I see his raised eyebrow and the smirk on his face, I realize...

"Oh, EW!" I say, swatting at him with my free hand, the one that's not holding the sleeping baby. "They are so not-"

"Roger would," he murmurs, smiling at me and still laughing lightly.

"Cora would not," I say, vehement. "This is mom's house."

"She didn't seem to mind about such activities outside the RV, where dad could have seen, were he to glance out the window."

"Yeah, but that's your dad," I say, rolling my eyes and returning my focus to the door. "It's different."

"The Goddess is all-seeing," Sinclair says, and I can feel him shrug. "She'll spy if she wants to – what's the difference between having s3x in her temple as opposed to anywhere else -"

But I hiss at him to shut up, looking around anxiously to make sure he wasn't overhead. Chuckling, wrapping his arms around my waist again, Sinclair pulls me back against him. "If the baby weren't here," he murmurs low into my ear, pulling my hips back against him...

"Enough out of you," I chide, though I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips. Because...well, my mate is very difficult to resist. Even in an inappropriate religious space dedicated to my mom.

Luckily, the door opens then, and Cora and Roger come striding out, wide smiles stretching over both of their faces as they speak softly to each other, holding hands, completely oblivious to our tense waiting.

"Cora!" I cry, thrilled and excited. Her head spins to me and her smile widens as I dash

over to her. But as I get within three feet of her I sense –

What is that? I stop dead in my tracks, raising my nose to sniff the air – but I can't –

Sinclair, coming up behind me, likewise goes stiff and then starts to laugh. "Well, congratulations, sister-in-law," he says, and I glance back to see a wide grin on his face. "Looks like you're a wolf after all."

"WHAT!" I shout, completely shocked and throwing an arm around my sister, tugging her to me and holding the baby to my side so that he doesn't get smushed. "Are you serious?! Are you?" And then I back off a little again, sniffing around her and sensing –

Yes – yes –

I may not have been able to smell it months ago, before I was immersed in this world – but my sister has a wolf, and it's awake in her, and prowling around.

Cora laughs, thrilled. "Yes, Ella," she says, nodding and stepping away from me but holding my hand. "I have a wolf. Um, I'm still human, so I can't shift? But apparently," she shrugs, shaking her head still in disbelief, "I have always had a wolf soul, inherited from mom. I just...never knew. She helped me find it."

"Wow," I say, squeezing her hand and staring at her, baffled and thrilled. "Cora, that's amazing – I mean, I think it's amazing. Do you?"

Thrilled, my sister nods and then takes her hand from mine, stepping back with her mate. "I do. We both do." And then she puts a hand on her stomach, still smiling at me. "The baby does too."

"WHAT!" I shout again, laughing and stumbling forward, putting my hand on her stomach as if I could feel the baby too. "You can feel the baby now?!"

"Yes," she says, happy. "I can feel him through the bond."

And then my eyes snap up to her and I feel my eyes instantly fill with tears as her words echo in my mind. "Feel...feel him?"

Slowly, grinning, Cora begins to nod. "Him."

"A baby boy!" I shout, ecstatic, and my mate wisely slips my own baby boy from my arms before I hurl myself at my sister, wrapping her up as tight as I can as I cry against her, so happy – so incredibly excited for her, and for me to have a nephew, and for Rafe to have a best friend-

Because it's not optional anymore Rafe and the baby are going to be best friends –

“Ella!” Cora laughs, holding me tight and shaking her head. “It’s all right! You’re choking me!”

But I have a hard time letting her go, so my sister just laughs and holds me as we rock back and forth, united in our joy.

When I am able to pull back a little and wipe my tears from my face, I see my own mate with his arm around his brother’s shoulder, beaming at him as Roger looks down at Rafe in Sinclair’s arms, probably considering that he’s going to have his own baby just like that in such a short amount of time.

“Do you know?” I ask, turning back to Cora. “How long the pregnancy will be?”

She pauses and then lets out a frustrated little groan, turning to Roger. “Roger, we forgot to ask!”

“Ask what?” he asks, looking up at her. “How long the pregnancy will be for a hybrid baby,” she answers, sighing, and I see Sinclair perk up at this, interested in the confirmation that the baby will indeed be part wolf and part human.

“Well, whatever,” Roger says with a shrug. “The baby will tell us when he’s ready, or whatever.”

“Or whatever,” Cora repeats, crossing her arms and glaring at him. “Easy for you to say.”

“Yes,” Roger says, grinning smugly at her but also with a great deal of love. I “Yes, it is.”

And then I laugh and loop my arm in my sister’s, tugging her with me as I head for the temple’s door. “Come on, let’s go tell Henry,” I say, smiling at her.

“Okay,” Cora says, sighing with happiness as if she hasn’t got a care in the world and I suppose she doesn’t 1 anymore, not after our mother answered so many of her questions. We give our thanks and goodbyes at the door to the priestess who let us in, who looks incredibly happy for us all, and then we start down the long stone steps just as the sky starts to turn pink with dusk.

“We still have so much to tell you,” Cora says, holding my hand as we trot excitedly down the steps.

“Really?” I ask, fascinated. What else is there to know?

“Yeah,” Roger says, smirking at his brother.

“Like what?” Sinclair says casually, clearly not really believing that there could be much else beyond the amazing news we’ve all just received.

“Like, that Rafe’s got magic powers,” Roger says with a wide grin. Sinclair and I both go dead still in our tracks, turning to our siblings. Then, as one, we both say the same thing: “Wait, what?”

And Roger and Cora burst into laughter.

Chapter 394 – By the Light of the Fire

Ella

That night, again around the fire, Henry leans forward in his chair and rests his elbows on his knees, smiling around at us.

“So, tell me if I’ve got this right,” he says, clearly tickled by it. “My two sons are mated to two sisters, who each have the Goddess’ blood in their veins, which means...” .” he pauses here, putting his thoughts together, “that all of my grandchildren are going to have mystical powers?”

Cora shrugs, grinning at him. “That’s what she told us,” she says, laughing a little bit.

“Well,” Henry says, pleased, leaning back in his chair and shaking his head in disbelief. “This saves me a great deal of worry.”

Sinclair turns to him confused. “What? Why?”

“Because,” Henry says, shrugging, trying to hold back his grin. “Imagine if just one of you were mated to a Goddess -born wolf, and only half of my grandchildren had magical powers. At least this way, I don’t have to pretend that I like the non-magical ones as much as the others.”

We all laugh at this, but I shake my head at Henry’s streak of dark humor. Because, beneath it, we all know that it’s not true. He was always going to love all of the grandchildren equally, no matter what.

“I wonder what your gift will be, little baby,” I say to Rafe, who is awake and sitting up in my lap, holding my fingers in his little fists and looking interestedly around at our group. I was very intrigued when Cora told me that all of their gifts would vary according to their personalities – I, like her, had assumed that they would be the same. We still haven’t figured out Cora’s gift yet, though we’ve all be thinking.

“Rafe’s will probably be shooting lasers from his eyes,” Roger murmurs, leaning forward to study my son. I shoot a little glare at Roger and he grins at me.

“No, he’s going to be a healer, like mommy,” I say, kissing Rafe’s head and making him look up at me with a little baby smile. I smile back at him, unable to help it.

“Nah, Rafe’s got a warrior’s soul,” Sinclair says at my side, leaning back in his chair and proudly considering son. It will be something to do with that.”

“Nooo,” I say in denial, glaring at my mate now. “Rafe is gentle. His powers will be for peace.”

“What about ours?” Roger asks, turning to Cora. “Are you getting any hints down the bond?”

“No,” she replies, sighing a little. “I can’t even figure out what mine is, let alone the baby.” She frowns a little in frustration, even though we’re all aware that nothing is going to wipe out her joy today. Everything for her – for all of us – is coming up roses.

“That’s all right Cora,” I say with my own contented sigh, leaning back in my chair. “We’ll figure it out.”

“It would be convenient,” she says, putting her chin in her hand and scowling at me a bit, “if my gift had been healing too. Considering that I’m a doctor.”

“Yes,” I say with a mock haughtiness, grinning at her, “that would be convenient, but not everyone can be as gentle, and loving, and restorative as me, Cora – it’s in my personality -”

And even as she gives me a little false glare, and I laugh, Sinclair nods as if it’s a fair point. But then Cora cocks her head to the side, clearly considering something.

Then, she sits up straight and looks around. “Actually,” she says to the men, “would you mind if Ella and I had a minute out here alone?”

Henry and Sinclair immediately agree and start to stand up but Roger frowns just a little. “Why?” he asks.

“Something mom said,” Cora says, turning to him, “about Ella...being able to help. Do you mind? A little sister time, to see if we can sort through it?”

Roger twists his mouth a little and I laugh a little when I see that he does mind, just a bit – but I forgive him, because I know he doesn’t want to be separated from her for a single moment right now not with everything they’ve just discovered. But still, when she gives him a little shove, he sighs and stands up

“Come on, new papa,” Sinclair says, wrapping an arm around Roger’s shoulders after taking Rafe from my arms so that Cora and I can concentrate on each other. “I’ll teach you how to change a diaper.”

Roger groans but Cora and I laugh as the men help Henry onto the platform lift and then head inside the RV.

“So, what are you thinking?” I ask eagerly, moving my chair closer to my sister’s so that we can better see each other in the dim light of the fire.

“Something mom said,” Cora sighs, looking down at her hands and clearly thinking it through as she goes. “She said that you could help me figure it out.” Cora looks up at me now, her mouth twisted to the side as she tries to work through it. “Do you think I’m like broken, or something?”

I immediately open my mouth to deny that, but she puts up a hand to stop me. “No, I mean like, do I need to be healed? With your powers? So that I can access the gift?”

“Oh,” I say, curious and sitting up straight. “I mean, that would make sense – I had to go out into the desert to get the gift from mom – or at least to access it. Maybe...maybe we need to like, do something to get it going. Some sort of ceremony like that.”

“Worth a try,” she says, shrugging. “Do you want to...give it a shot?”

“Sure,” I say, reaching for her hands. And then, quite quickly, I run my power through and over her body. Her wolf raises her nose to the gift as it passes her, giving it a warm little nudge, and I smile as I sense her. Such a pretty wolf – her fur a thousand shades of brown, from the lightest tawny to nearly black..

But as I scan Cora, seeking any places that she’s hurt or tied up or anything...I come up with nothing.

“Sorry, Cora,” I sigh, dropping her hands and sinking back onto the chair. “You’re totally fine, as far as my gift can sense.”

“Boo,” she says, likewise sinking back in the chair and gnawing at her lip. I watch her as she moves on to the next option. “Um,” she says, “do you think I could try healing you?”

“What?” I ask, my face twisting with confusion.

“Well, mom also said all the gifts were linked. Maybe I can...heal a little? And maybe doing that will allow me to like, access my full ability?”

“Okay,” I say, and I hold my hand out to her. “I cut my finger this morning on a bottle cap, T say with a sigh, realizing that I’ve been meaning to heal it all day and just got distracted. ” My gift could fix this up in a cinch can you do it?”

Cora shrugs and takes my hand in hers, closing her eyes and pushing herself to fall into the meditative state I use when I access my gift. I do my very best to stay very still and, importantly, not to fall into that same meditative state and heal it myself.

After a few minutes, I gasp a little when I do feel a very slight tingling at my fingertip where the cut is. I see Cora push and concentrate, but then, five minutes later, when she

opens her eyes and peers down at it, she scowls and pushes my hand away.

“Still there,” she says, scowling.

“I know,” I sigh, holding it up to look at my hand. “I did feel a little tingling though. And it does feel better.”

“Really?” she asks, interested. “Yeah,” I say, smiling at her. “It’s interesting that they’re linked. Maybe we can all do like, a little bit of each other’s stuff. But I do think that it’s fair to say that healing is not your gift.”

“Well then what is it -” she sighs, scowling and starting to get frustrated. I tuck my feet beneath me and smile at my sister, who has always been a little more hot-headed than me.

“Do you think it makes sense that I’m a healer?” I ask quietly. “Mom said that our gifts match our personalities.”

“Well duh, Ella,” Cora says, rolling her eyes at me a little bit. “You’re the most maternal person I’ve ever met – all you want to do is take care of everyone, especially babies, and fix things-

“True,” I say, cocking my head to the side, pleased at the idea. “I’d heal the whole world if I could.”

“But that doesn’t help me,” Cora says, starting to lose her temper a little bit. I look up at the sky, where in the distance I hear a tiny bit of thunder roll. I wonder, passively, if we’re going to move our little think tank inside.

“Well, what’s your key personality trait?” I ask, curious. Cora glares at me a little. “I don’t know,” she answers in a huff. “Being frustrated? Stubborn? Closed off to everything? I mean, I didn’t let Roger even get close to me for months – and he’s my mate -”

“That’s not true, Cora,” I say, leaning forward and frowning at her. “You’re... well, you’re stubborn, but you close yourself off because you feel things so intensely -”

“Well, what the hell is the good of that,” she snaps, glaring at me a little, even though I can tell she doesn’t mean it and instantly feels bad about it.

I glance upwards at the sky as the breeze picks up, blowing in storm clouds faster than I thought they could move. And my lips part, just a little bit...

“Cora...” I whisper.

“No seriously, Ella!” She says, throwing a hand up and heaving a big sigh as she glares into the fire. “What kind of stupid gift matches someone like me – what, can I like, turn things to rock? Can I halt trains in their tracks with sheer will? Can I...can I like freeze people in place, just by glaring at them?” She scowls as she crosses her arms across her chest, “that’s what my previous dating history would suggest, at least,” she grumbles.

And, precisely in time with that grumble, thunder rumbles through the sky. But Cora doesn’t notice.

“Cora,” I say again, a grin spreading over my face.

“Seriously, Ella,” she says, snapping her gaze to me. “What kind of gift matches up with someone who is so headstrong, so constantly agitated, so-

But put out a hand towards her, interrupting her. “So...tempestuous?” I say, a smile spreading wide across my face. Cora goes still when she sees my expression. “What?” she says, frowning at me. “What is it? What did you figure out?”

But I say nothing, just laughing and holding up my hands as the rain starts to patter all around us. And Cora’s jaw drops open.

Chapter 395 – Stormy Secrets

Cora glares at Roger, her arms crossed, as he almost literally rolls with laughter inside of the RV, doubling over so hard he has to lay back on the white leather cushions of the kitchenette. “I still don’t see what’s so funny about this,” Cora snaps. I wrap my arm around Sinclair’s waist, grinning widely and listening to the furious sound of the rain pouring on the RV.

I can feel my mate chuckle a little, likewise enjoying the scene. “It’s just too good, Cora!” Roger says between laughs as his father shakes his head, also smiling, and rolls away into the living area with Rafe in his lap, clearly not wanting his daughter-in-law to see the amusement on his face. “What!” Cora snaps, and I have to cover my mouth to hide my own laughter when I see how pissed she’s getting. The rain hits harder, now including little bits of hail.

“It’s just,” Roger says, working hard to sit up and wiping a tear of mirth from his eye, “we had no idea you could control the weather -” another burst of laughter“- but you wanted meso bad that you created a hurricane-” he roars with it again “-just to trap me in a motel, so you could get me in bed

“Oh my god!” Cora snaps, blushing beet red and striding forward a few steps to smack him on the arm, which just makes him laugh harder.

I have to turn my face in Sinclair’s shoulder now – because as much as I want to support my sister, Roger is totally right. And it’s hilarious. Sinclair wraps an arm around me, holding me tight, openly laughing himself and watching with glee as the scene unfolds before us.

“It’s true!” Roger continues as the wind howls around us, shaking the RV a little bit with Cora’s embarrassed rage. “For heaven’s sake, Cora – you didn’t have to nearly drown us to get me in bed, a little light rain would have done it – you could have just given us a flat tire – ”

Growling a little and still blushing hard, Cora climbs onto the little kitchen bench seat, reaching out to smack Roger again, though he scoots away from her. “Shut up!” she mutters, “or I’ll strike you with lightning next!”

“Do we even need that kind of foreplay, Cora? You’re already knocked up -”

Cora emits an enraged, embarrassed little shriek and begins to swat at Roger, which has us all howling with laughter. My whole body shakes against Sinclair’s as I give up pretending and laugh so hard that my sides hurt. Because, as much as Cora hates it, Roger’s reading of her is perfectly accurate – she was so pent up emotionally, and loved him so much, that something about it must have activated her gift that day. The storm wasn’t sent by some dark force – it was just Cora’s own dramatic way of creating a

space where she and Roger could be alone together, where they had to face their truth.

The wind and the rain abates a little as Roger pulls Cora into his lap and holds her tight, pinning her arms to her side so she can't hit him anymore, even though I'm sure he didn't feel any pain. He talks to her softly, still laughing and teasing her in the way she needs to be teased but likewise letting her know that he thinks she's amazing, and marvelous, and that if he'd had the same power he'd have done the exact same thing weeks before.

"Precisely right," Cora growls, pressing herself close to him and nudging his cheek with her nose in a particularly wolfish way. "You're just jealous of my powers." "Yes, little demigoddess," he murmurs, kissing her forehead but still grinning with his glee. "I'd have frozen you away in a little igloo jail made entirely of ice until you gave into me – ""Do you think I can do that?" she asks suddenly, lifting her head and looking at him eagerly.

"I mean, rain I can obviously do but do you think I can do ice as well?" "Well you just made it hail," he says with a shrug. "I did?" she gasps, eager, looking up at the ceiling. "I, for one," I say, pitching my voice a bit loud to remind them that they're not the only ones in the room, especially as I see Roger's hand slipping a bit lower on Cora's waist than he'd usually venture in mixed company.

Cora and Roger turn to me, curious, and I smile widely at them, still excited that my sister has figured out her gift. "Well?" Cora asks, grinning at me.

"I think that you probably can do ice," I continue, cocking my head. "Do you remember when, that awful night, the faux priestess froze me to the floor? Well, when mom unlocked my gift, I was able to melt the ice. And that has nothing to do with healing powers, so," I give a little shrug, looking up at Sinclair, seeing what he thinks. " Maybe it's... the crossover that mom was talking about? How all of our gifts are connected, but we can only do a little of what each other can do?"

"Interesting," Cora murmurs, looking down at her hands as if she can read the magic there. Then she holds her hands out towards Roger, her fingers splayed wide. "What are you doing?" he asks quietly. "Trying to freeze you," she murmurs, concentrating. "What!" he gasps, smacking her hands away, which just makes her laugh. "Well, I would have stopped," she says, rolling her eyes, "before I gave you frostbite. Or killed you or whatever."

"Let's...not experiment," he murmurs, looking at her like she's a little crazy, "with that too much." "Don't laugh at me so much," she says, leaning closer and giving him a wicked grin. "And I won't be tempted to." Roger snarls a little and grabs her by the chin, planting a solid kiss on her mouth, and Sinclair sighs and turns me away. "Do you think," my mate murmurs in my ear, "that we can sneak in and steal the bedroom while they're distract-"

"Not a chance!" Roger shouts from behind us. I laugh and then groan as Roger scoops Cora up in his arms and carries her to the back of the RV, both of them cackling victoriously the whole way. Sighing, I lean back against my mate and glare at little at the couch which shifts into a queen-sized bed which is neither big enough for both of us nor very comfortable. "Guess you're stuck out here with me," Henry says, wheeling over and grinning up at us.

"Oh, we don't mind that," I say, smiling warmly at him and hoping he didn't take it that way. "After all, you can wake up with little Mr. Fuss," I coo, leaning down to smile at my baby, "when he gets up at 2 am! For absolutely no reason!"

"More than happy to," Henry agrees with a smile, tickling Rafe's belly with his fingertips and making our little boy laugh. "Any time." And I bite my lip a little as I take Sinclair's hand, loving how much Henry and Rafe are already connected. Family, after all, is everything to me now that I've got it. I'm so, so incredibly grateful that Cora and I have been so embraced by people who love us so much. "Come on, trouble," Sinclair sighs, starting to turn out the beds. The wind picks up outside the RV and lightning strikes close by. We all ignore it, not allowing ourselves to consider, really, what it means. "We've got a long road tomorrow."

And I sigh as I help him, because I know it's true. And I am not looking forward to the return of the highway and everything that awaits us at home.

Chapter 396 – The Long Road Home

Ella

“No more road trips,” I grumble under my breath, trying to rock my little baby in my arms and distract him from the rumbling of the road, “ever again.”” Don’t be so sore about it,” Cora says, moving one of her checkers forward a space. “At least we got the information we were coming for.”

“Well that I will never begrudge,” I say, turning my head and smiling at her.” But next time?”

She grins, anticipating what I’m going to say next. “We’re taking a private jet.” Cora laughs, shaking her head at me and sitting back against the backrest of her seat in the kitchenette.” That would be a waste of resources, and it’s probably too short of a flight or something to mom’s temple,” she sighs.

“Well then one of our children,” I huff, leaning forward to study the board, “is going to have to learn to bend time and space, because I am not suffering through this again-”

But before I can even finish my sentence, Roger at the driver’s seat hits a huge bump and the game board goes flying in the air, pieces scattering despite their magnetic bond. I groan and sit back against my own seat as Cora sighs and picks up the pieces, putting them back in the box. We both know that particular distraction is over. “Sorry!” Roger calls over his shoulder. “Won’t happen again!” “He just knew I was beathing you,” I grumble as Sinclair comes and sits next to me.” Why did you let him drive, anyway? You’re better at it than he is.” “Oh, no he’s not,” Cora murmurs, defending her mate, but Sinclair and I ignore her.

“He insisted,” Sinclair tells me with a shrug, reaching for the baby. “And you know how he gets when he feels like he’s not getting his turn with the toy.”

I laugh a little, handing the baby over to my mate who smiles down at his grumpy son. “I agree though,” Sinclair says, smiling at me now and reaching out to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. “Next time? All luxury. We’ll get you all drunk at the airport so you don’t even remember the flight, and then we’ll spend the rest of our time luxuriating.” “This had better be a promise,” I murmur, leaning against him and closing my eyes. “You got it, baby,” he whispers, kissing the top of my head. “Hey, so,” Cora says, and I open my eyes to see her leaning across the table, her attention focused mostly on Sinclair. “Where are we going, anyway?” “Um, home?” he says, frowning at her. “Yeah,” she says, cocking her head to the side, “but...like, bunker home? Horribly uncomfortable clinic home? Your home, the house of a thousand corpses?” Sinclair laughs a little. “Those are gone now,” he says, waving a hand and smiling. “We have a very...particular service which helps us with those kinds of needs.”

"Ohweird," I say, sitting up and looking at him with curiosity. "What isthatjob interview like?"

"Information above your pay grade," he says, smiling and patting my knee. " So, we're going to the house?" Cora asks, interested. "Is that...safe?" " Well," Sinclair considers seriously, "we're pretty damn sure that the Cult itself doesn't have any particular problem with us – that they were merely serving Xander, probably because he supplied them with a great deal of money and resources. But now that we've put a serious dent in the Cult's resources and manpower, and Xander has fled," he shrugs, "we don't see any reason not to go back to the city."

"We're keeping a close eye on it, but I think it's time to start our lives again." "It has to be more complicated than that," I say, shaking my head and frowning at him. "Xander isn't going to rest -" "No, he's not," Sinclair agrees, looking at me seriously. "But we aren't without resources, love. We only went to the bunker because we didn't know what we were up against."

But now that our enemy is on the run, it is a good a time as any to regroup and focus on the interrupted task: ensuring this country is united under a single King. "And that's you, right?" Cora asks, looking at him curiously. "Well, we hope so," he says, grinning at her. "Do you have any objections?"

"Are the people of this nation aware," she says, "that theirKingeatsallthe chips? And does not bother to consider whether his sister-in-law wanted any?"

Sinclair grins and leans forward. "Are they likewise aware, that said sister-in- law ateallof the chocolate chip cookies

Cora gasps, appalled. "Unfair!" she says. "This sister-in-law is pregnant!" "Enough!" I groan, especially as Rafe starts to fuss more in Sinclair's arms. I raise my hands to my temples and rub them gently as my mate and my sister fall silent, grinning at each other. "I cannot take argument on top of traveling in a sardine can. Also, it is smelly in here." "Truce, then," Cora sighs. "So, house?" I say, likewise curious as I look up at my mate. " House," he says with a nod. "...for now."

I frown at him, intrigued, but he sends a little pulse down the bond which shushes me, letting me know he wants to have a private conversation instead of one with Cora. I nod and give him a little kiss on the shoulder before resting my head in the same spot. "So, what do you think," Cora asks, looking down at her hands again and opening and closing them as if she can see her gift sparking there. "Am I going to be able to shoot lightening bolts at people? Or not?"

"You can do anything you put your mind to," I say placatingly to my sister, grinning, imagining how very much she'd like to zap everyone who got on her nerves. "I've

actually been meaning to talk to you about that," Sinclair says. "Really?"

she asks, her eyes going wide with curiosity." Sure," he says, giving a little shrug and leaning forward to engage her more completely. "Considering that I'm likely to become the King of a nation that's going to have a lot of military concerns, I wonder if you'd be willing to consider experimenting with your gift and seeing how it could be used... well, as a kind of weapon."

"Really!?" she says again, more eager now. "I never thought of it like that -"

"Cora!" I scold, sitting up straight and frowning between my mate and my sister. "You're a doctor! You shouldn't be thinking about hurting people with your gift!"

"Chill out, Ella," she murmurs, leaning back in her seat and frowning at me. "I'm not actually going to strike people down with lightning bolts, but Sinclair is right – this could be strategically useful."

"Creating a hurricane in the face of an advancing Navy," Sinclair offers, turning to me with a shrug. "Or even, on the day of a battle, ensuring that the other troops are rained on while ours stay dry this could turn the tide in any war." I go a little pale thinking about it, looking down at my baby. I've had enough of war, and I certainly don't want him raised in a world filled with it. "Do you really think we're headed for situations like that?" I ask, my voice soft. Sinclair lifts a hand and softly strokes my hair, sympathy clear on his face. "I'm sorry to say it, love," he gently replies, "but I think so."

We're not coming to power in a time of peace. We can fight for that but...we have to fight." I sigh, looking down at the table, worried all over again. "But at least they've got us," Cora says, leaning over the table and offering her hand. I look up at her, not really understanding what she means. She shrugs. "You and I want peace. So do these three," she says, nodding her head to indicate the Sinclair men. "Put together, we're...kind of a force to be reckoned with. I'd rather be fighting for peace than letting others decide for us." "I get it," I mumble, sinking back in my chair with another sigh. "I just... want more for our children than that."

"We'll give it to them," Sinclair promises, and I look up into his eyes, wanting to believe him very much. "Together, we'll make this world what it should be for their sake, as well as everyone else's." Slowly, I nod, agreeing to the plan. I take my sister's offered hand and give it a squeeze. And the RV continues to rumble down the road, driving us back to the city where this all started. The city, and that nation, and the world that is ours to shape if we're willing to fight for it.

Chapter 397 – A New Home

A few days later, after Sinclair and I have had some time to dwell and consult and decide, we invite Roger and Cora over to our little house early one morning. We're both standing out front waiting for them, Rafe all dressed up in blue and white in my arms.

I grin down at my baby, so pleased to finally be back home, to be able to dress him in all of the clothes I ordered for him during my long weeks of bedrest. This kid has an amazing wardrobe already, but of course he wasn't able to wear it – and heartbreakingly grew out of some of it during our time away in the bunker.

"He's getting really big," I murmur to Sinclair, shifting my baby higher in my arm. "The you in him is starting to come out."

Sinclair grins and looks down at the baby. "He'll be six feet in no time. My little linebacker." "Better not be," I grumble, but I'm unable to help from smiling down at my little cutie. "He needs to stay my little beachball baby for awhile yet. At least another sixteen years." "Don't count on it," Sinclair sighs. "I got my growth spurt early. He'll be taller than you by fourth grade." "No," I gasp, spinning to look up at him in horror. My mate just shrugs, laughing at me and implying that it's inevitable, but then he lifts his chin towards the driveway where Roger's car is pulling in. I take a deep breath as I turn to watch them, and then I consider something out loud. "Do you know," I say, "I've never actually seen Roger's apartment."

They've been staying there for the past few days, Cora happy to abandon her own rather bland apartment. "You're better off," Sinclair replies, raising his eyebrows. "Bachelor city." "Neon signs?" I ask, wrinkling my nose. (Collection of commemorative beer glasses?" "Everything you're imagining," Sinclair sighs, sinking his hands into his pockets as Cora and Roger park and climb out of their car, and worse." "Barf," I murmur, and then I look back down at my baby again.

"Don't worry, Rafey. We'll never let you live like that." "Hi!" Cora says cheerfully, coming over to us and kissing me on the cheek before snatching Rafe out of my arms, cooing to her godson and saying hello. "What, nothing for me?" Sinclair says, grinning – while he's clearly pleased that she, like us, loves the baby so much, he's not turning away the opportunity to tease her. Cora just waves a dismissive hand at Sinclair while Roger likewise kisses me on the cheek and gives his brother a hug. "Is there breakfast?" Roger asks. "Cora can't cook. I'm starving – haven't eaten for days."

"My skills lay elsewhere!" Cora calls over her shoulder, dancing away a little to show Rafe some of the little flowers that are starting to sprout up in the garden. "Sure," Sinclair says, laughing and nodding towards the open door behind us. "Come on in. We made some changes we're curious to see what you think." "Really?" Roger asks as the three of us troupe in together, Cora following behind with the baby. "You weren't satisfied with the blood-and-horror theme that you'd gone with in your bedroom?"

But his mouth falls open, his saucy attitude leaving him as he looks around the living room at the entrance of our house, which has been completely redecorated in shades of blue and grey with luxurious brown leather furniture. "Wow," he says, his eyes going wide. "You guys you really worked fast with some changes," "Do you like them?" I ask eagerly, winding my arm tightly around Sinclair's as Cora comes to my side.

"I love it," she says, looking around at the antique Audubon bird prints that we've used to decorate the walls. "It's so...simple, and chic. But also warm." She looks at me with both love and jealousy in her eyes. "You're so good at this stuff, Ella," she sighs. "I wish I could do this."

"It's a gift," I say, laughing as I throw my hair over my shoulder. "Come look upstairs!" And then I grab her hand and pull her and the baby after me. I can hear Roger and Sinclair following behind us. "I see that you've kept the stair lift," Cora murmurs, laughing a little. "Well, that's useful for Henry," I say as we reach the top of the steps, tossing a grin over my shoulder. "Plus, very fun." Then I pull her into the bedroom, which has likewise been totally redone in a thousand shades of white, beige, and blush. Cora gasps when she sees the gigantic bed with its too-plush comforter, the cozy white fur rug, even the electric fireplace that we've had installed on one wall. "Oh my god," she sighs, stepping into the room and turning around. Then, she sees the closet, which we've had completely refitted to better accommodate two people's clothing.

"This is incredible," Roger agrees, stepping into the room and looking around with what I can only think of as jealousy in his own eyes. I clap a little, jumping up and down as I see them admire the space. "Though I have to admit," he says, turning back to his brother. "This doesn't feel as you as the last room did."

Sinclair just shrugs, a little smirk on his lips. "We decided it was time for a change." "Ella," Cora says, frowning as she peeks into the closet – which now has a chandelier, a station for jewelry, and a full-length mirror...but no clothing in it, not a single piece. "Why... why is this empty?" She turns back to the room as well. "And where is all of Rafe's stuff? His changing table – his bassinet -" And I squeal a little bit as I see her figuring out our surprise.

"We decided," Sinclair repeats, "that it was time for a rather big change."

Cora stares at us confused. But Roger gasps, putting it all together faster than his mate. "Oh, my god," he moans, stumbling back a step and looking around at the room again. He focuses, in particular, on the painting that we placed above the fireplace. It's subtle still in light colors to match the rest of the room – but clearly portrays a summer storm above a forest. "No, guys – you didn't -" "

What?" Cora asks again, coming to my side, and I take her hand. "We're moving into the

palace, Cora," I say softly, beaming at her. "We want...we did all of this for you."
"What!?" she gasps, apparently unable to think of any other words as she raises a shaky hand to her mouth. "What are you what do you..." And then she turns in the room, looking around at everything – all of the things I picked out just for her. And I feel a thrill of joy radiate out from my heart as I watch my sister's eyes fill with tears.

"We'll get you all the baby stuff," I say quietly, "a little later. But we thought...for now, you might want to just settle in the two of you..." "It's too much," Roger says, sitting down hard on the bed as he continues to stare around the room, shaking his head. "Dominic – we can't -" "You have to," Sinclair says with a shrug. "Paperwork's all finished. It's out of my hands now – your problem."

He smacks his hands together as if dusting them off, proving his point as he smiles at his brother. "Ella," Cora says, a little sob hitching in her throat as she steps close to me and lets me wrap my arms around her.

"I'm so happy to be able to give you a home, Cora," I whisper to her. "What we always wanted as kids. What we both have now."

At that, she really does burst into sobbing tears, and I laugh and hold her close, feeling a couple slip down my cheeks as well. I look over at Roger, feeling a little undone to see him wiping at his own eyes. "Thanks, Dominic," he says, and I grin at the fact that the brother we usually can't get to shut up has nothing left to say. "This was...this was so nice." "We love you, brother," Dominic says, patting his back and looking down at him. "You do have to name the kid after me, though." "No way!" Cora protests through her sobs, not letting that slide. "Middle name," Roger murmurs, smiling up at his brother. "For sure." And Dominic laughs, and so do I.

Our eyes meet and I don't even need to pass an emotion down the bond to know that he feels exactly the same as me: so grateful for our siblings, so excited for them, and so, so happy to be able to give them their first home in which to raise their child.

"Thanks for getting me out of that apartment," Cora murmurs into my neck, making me laugh. "It was so bad." "Which one?" I ask, grinning. "Yours or his?" "Both," she sighs. "Does this mean you two are moving into the palace?" Roger asks, finding his feet again and taking a steadying breath. "Yup," Sinclair replies, wrapping an arm around his brother's shoulders, "Right after breakfast."

"Oh, so there really is food," Cora says, lifting her head and looking a little eagerly towards the door. "You two," I say, shaking my head and walking with her over to it. "You're going to have to learn how to feed yourselves. And the baby." "We'll play it by ear," she concedes, grinning, and then we all head down the steps for our final meal in our house.

Or, I think, smiling to myself, the first of many in Roger and Cora's.

Chapter 398 – King and Queen

Ella

“I’m glad we did that,” I say later that afternoon as Sinclair pulls our car around to the front entrance of the palace. “I couldn’t stand to say goodbye to that house if it was to a stranger. Too many memories there.” “I agree,” Sinclair says, parking directly out front in what feels...well, feels too informal for the future King’s first entrance to the palace, his new home. “Doesn’t this place have like, a garage?”

I murmur, looking into the back seat to check on little Rafe, who is happily chewing on the sleeve of his little baby hoodie and staring at himself in a mirror attached to his car seat. “I... think so...” Sinclair says, and I look up in surprise to see him grimacing at me a little. “I’ve only really been here for state occasions,” he says, shrugging.”

And the birth of our child,” I point out.

“Well for that,” he says, “wealsojust parked out front.”

“True true,” I say, turning away to my door. “I guess we’ll figure it all out. Yes, we will,” he murmurs, getting out of the car and opening the back seat to lift out Rafe’s carrier. While I wait for them to come around to my side, I stare up at the gorgeous palace in front of me. “I can’t believe this is going to be my home,” I murmur. “I can’t believe I’m going to be a King,” he sighs. I look up at him, studying the lines of his handsome face. “Yeah,” I agree. “Me neither.”

Sinclair laughs and shakes his head down at me. “Well, I would hope thatyouwould try to chuff me up a little bit there.”

I laugh and take his arm, squeezing it. “Well, you know I think you cando it,” I say, grinning, “and that I don’t think anyone else could do it any better. I just,” I consider it for a moment, shaking my head. “I don’t know. I’m not going to be able to get used to people calling you King.”

“Will you be able to get used to people calling you Queen?” he asks, brow arched. I laugh up into his face at the ridiculousness of it. “Absolutely not,” I reply. “They’ll all just have to call me Ella, or I’ll walk right past them without realizing that they’re talking to me.” “You don’t do so poorly responding to Luna,” he says, pulling his arm from my grip and wrapping it around my shoulder to pull me close. Yes, but that feels more real,” I say quietly. “I...know what a Luna’s supposed to do. I want to protect my pack, help them in all things.” “I imagine Queen is much the same,” he says softly. “You’ll get used to it. And you’ll be great.” “Do I get a crown?” I ask grinning up at him, but then my face falls slack with shock when he slowly begins to nod.

“Wait, seriously?” I say, my eyes going wide. “I get acrown?”

"It's technically not yours," he replies, laughing. "It belongs to the nation to be passed from Queen to Queen. But, for as long as you're alive and we're on the throne," he grins widely at me, seeing the excitement on my face, "you get a crown." "Well then let's go!" I shout, bursting forward and heading up the steps. "What the hell are we waiting for!"

To my extreme disappointment, Sinclair does not take me immediately to the vault with the crown jewels and let me wear my tiara while I unpack all of our moving boxes. "Not until the official coronation, my ass," I murmur angrily as I use a box cutter to cut the tape on probably my fortieth box and start to unload all of Rafe's baby clothes. A few feet away from me in his little playpen, Rafe lets out a little squeal that I choose to interpret as support. "Thank you, Prince Rafe," I call to him. "I agree. He's being cruel."

"I am not," Sinclair laughs, coming into the room with a little tray of food for our lunch. "I'm just following the rules. It's not really a Kingdom anymore the jewels belong to everyone. It's not right to wear them until the people have officially given them to us. And then," he says, putting the tray down on the bed, "only on state occasions."

"Again," I sigh, pausing to look up at him, "this is a rule that I will choose, in my wisdom as Queen, not to follow." And then I send him a mental image down the bond of when, precisely, I plan to be wearing that crown. And just how good I'll look wearing that crown, and only that crown. Sinclair blinks and then huffs a laugh, grinning at me. "Fine," he says. "One exception can be made. One."

"One to start," I say primly, turning back to my task at hand. "Come and eat," he says, taking the fancy lids off of our plates of sandwiches, like we're in some kind of hotel. I was pleased to hear that Sinclair, in starting to hire people to refill the palace with workers and get it back to fully functioning, hired a head chef. Still, I don't even know where the kitchens are and it feels strange already to be waited on like this. What am I going to do when I'm pregnant again? Just...wander the halls, starving, searching for the kitchens? "I'm not hungry yet," I say to Sinclair, laying out Rafe's clothes on the floor in neat piles and then disassembling the box. "I want to get us moved in." I do take a moment, though, to look around the main bedchamber. "Remember the last time we were here?"

I ask quietly, taking in the tall windows, the gorgeous floors. We've had much of the furniture replaced with that which suits our taste a bit better, but still...I'll never forget the day we brought our baby into the world. "Vividly," Sinclair murmurs, biting into his sandwich and watching me. "Are you sure you still want us to be our bedroom?"

"We have options." "Yes," I say with a little sigh, looking around. "I'm sure. It's... fitting." I smile at him. "This is a King's bedroom for sure – and you are a King!" "Not yet, he says, shaking his head. "You keep saying that," I reply, frowning at him. "Is there something wrong? Are you... doubting the fact that the coronation will go through or something?"

"No," he replies, cocking his head to the side. "I just...want everything to be right. Damon and his father..." he shakes his head, a little angry, "they took liberties with the privileges of this position that they shouldn't have. It wasn't right."

"I know," I say quietly, watching my whole-hearted mate struggle with his new responsibilities. "But you'll be better." "I hope I can be," he sighs. And then he looks over at the baby. And I hope I can convince him to be as well, when his turn comes." "Rafe?" I say, turning to my baby in surprise. But then my face bursts into a smile. "No, he'll be a great Prince! And a wonderful King!"

And then I laugh, crawling over to his little playpen and peeking over the edge, grinning at my little boy. "How could he not be, he's so sweet!" Sinclair smiles at me but then shrugs. "Every tyrant was once a well-loved little baby whose mother thought they were too cute to do anything wrong." Yes," I sigh, standing and reaching down to pick up my baby and carry him over to his poor worried father. "But we'll raise him right." I kiss my baby on his head, sending a little love down the bond to him that makes him smile and wiggle with happiness. "We'll do our very best, Rafe," Sinclair says to our boy, smiling at him. "We can promise you that." "So," I say, after a moment as I raise my baby to my shoulder and hold him close. "What's next for us? We're in the palace. We're awaiting some kind of coronation. What do we have to...do?" "Well," my mate says, looking up at me with serious eyes. "I've got a bunch of politics and meetings to attend, as well as a palace and a nation to get going. But you...well, Ella, I want you to do what you please." "What do you mean?" I ask, confused. "I don't just want to sit around relaxing and watching movies all day – I had enough of that during bed rest, it was terrible. I want to help you -"

"I know," he says, laughing and reaching for my hand, which I give him. "But I don't want to...giveyou tasks, or tell me how to help me. I want you to pick your own projects. Your instincts are excellent, Ella. I have my own ideas about how to help the people of this nation, both human and wolf alike. But I know you do too."

I bite my lip. "I'm not sure I do just. yet." Honestly, it probably makes me a bad Queen but...I haven't given it as much thought as I should. "Well, you will," he says, nodding to me. "And when you do, I want you to follow them. But in the meantime, if you'd like a suggestion..." I nod eagerly, excited for a project and curious about what he has in mind. "What do you think about planning a wedding? A big one, very public."

I wrinkle my nose at him, confused. Then I lean forward. "Sinclair," I say, shaking my head a little. "We alreadydidthat. I mean I know a mating ceremony is a little different but we –"

"No," he says, laughing up at me, and I can't help but smile down into my mate's handsome face. Sometimes he's still so beautiful when he laughs that it takes my breath away. "I'm not talking about us." "Then who?" I ask.

“Roger and Cora,” he says quietly. “I think it could be good for the nation to see a wolf marry a human. Even if she’s ...notpreciselyas human as we thought she was. What do you think?”

And a huge smile breaks out on my face that, by his laugh, tells himpreciselywhat I think.

“I love it,” I whisper. And then I squeal in excitement, spinning fast in a circle and laughing with joy. “A wedding! A wedding for Roger and Cora!” I absolutely cannot wait.

Chapter 399 – Bringing Aid

Our first night in the palace is so strange for me. My two boys are sleeping soundly on either side of me – Sinclair sprawled out over our supersized bed (it's much bigger than a King – I don't even know if they have a name for it anymore; we had to make a custom order) and Rafe's bassinet is pulled up close on my other side. I look first at my mate and then at my little baby, smiling at each of them, marveling at how much they already resemble each other with their dark hair and their wide-set eyes, each framed with dark lashes.

My smile deepens as I look between them. I mean, Sinclair is of course lacking Rafe's pudgy cheeks, but the resemblance is still uncanny. It's very, very clear who this baby's daddy is.

"Rude of you, little baby," I whisper, rolling over on my side and peeking into the bassinet, "to not bother looking like me at all." He sighs a little in his sleep and wiggles, getting more comfortable. It's so cute that I think my heart might burst at the sight of it. But the sight of my super-cute little baby can only do so much to distract me from all of the thoughts racing through my mind right now. I roll onto my back and stare at the distant ceiling, turning them over one-by-one.

Half of them pertain to the wedding, which I really am excited about. And I do think it's a good idea – half of the trouble of bringing this nation together is suggesting to humans and wolves alike that this nation respects both kinds of persons – and that we're allequal. A marriage between them – especially as publicized as Sinclair thinks it should be will go far with both populations in suggesting that the

Royal family, at least, truly embraces this idea.

I wrinkle my nose and laugh a little at the thought of myself as part of a royal family- I'm nowhere near fancy enough for such a title – but then I sigh again, distracted.

Because Sinclair's other point is still valid – I know, in my heart, that I want to help our citizens, help everyone. And I have this incredible healing power that I could use in our nation's hospitals to actually physically help people...

But is that what I really want to do? Is that the best use of my gifts? Then, quite suddenly, I remember someone who might be able to help. As quietly as I can, I turn over and slide open the drawer by my bedside table, pulling out the cellphone that I haven't had for weeks since we've been away in the bunker. I flick it on and then quickly pull up a familiar name in my contacts and send off a text:

Isabel! I've been a bad friend – but we're back now, from where we had to go. Do you have a minute tomorrow? To talk?

Biting my lip – because I really do feel bad about neglecting my friendship, especially after I asked her to stay here instead of going home – I send off my message and hope that my friend can forgive me.

But, considering how good and kind she is if not a bit sharp-edged at times, I think, smiling – I think, and hope, that she'll forgive me.

Then, feeling a little better at having gotten started on a plan, I finally drift off to sleep.

When Sinclair's alarm rings the next morning, he groans as he rolls over to turn it off, and then he flops back in his spot and reaches out an arm for me. But he opens his eyes in surprise when his hand meets...nothing. Because as soon as I heard the alarm, I gasped and rolled away, reaching for my phone, desperate to see if Isabel replied. Yesss," I whisper, excited to see that I have a message waiting. "What?" Sinclair asks, groggy. "What's happening?" "Nothing," I murmur, quickly flicking my messages open. Go back to sleep." Ignoring him, I eagerly click open Isabel's reply.

Ella! Where the hell have you been!? We've all been so worried! Please come and see me – I want to hug you myself and assure myself that you're all right. I'm at the Refugee Center – come by any time after 8, someone will lead you to me.

I eagerly start to type out my reply but, before I get far, I hear a snarl behind me and feel a gigantic arm wrap tight around my waist. I gasp and then shriek in shock as Sinclair pulls me, laughing, across the bed to settle tightly against his chest.

"What the hell is this," he growls in my ear, pretending to be angry." Mymate? Neglectingme in the morning?"

"Ohh, poor big scary Alpha," I tease, turning in his arms so that my stomach is pressed against his, pouting mockingly up into his face. "Did you need your morning kiss and snuggle, or else you can't start your day?"

"Damn right I can't," he growls, baring his teeth at me – an act that would probably make some men quail but which only makes me laugh." We're going to have to introduce some discipline in this house – you haveduties, little Queen -"

"Ohhhh, little Queen," I say, pressing myself tighter against him and wrapping my arms around his neck so that my whole body is flush against his.

"I like this new nickname. Very elegant." "Do you," he murmurs, dropping his head to drag kisses along my neck and down across his shoulder, the tickly stubble of his beard making me shiver. "I could think of a few other things to call you." "Oh really," I sigh, rolling one shoulder back so that Sinclair can continue his path down across my collar bone and lower, until his lips press against the skin just above my breasts. "Like what?"

“Bad girl,” he offers, glaring up at me.

“For snatching up your phone first thing in the morning. Making me jealous of whoever it is you’re talking to.” And then he drops his gaze, continuing his path. I shudder a little at the feel of his lips against my skin, burying my fingers in his silky black hair and letting my head tilt back a little at the pleasure of it.

“No reason to be jealous,” I murmur. “It’s just Isabel. I’m going to visit her at the Refugee Center today.” “What?” he asks, snapping his head up, all the play gone from his voice. I go still, frowning at him, wondering what went wrong. What is it?” “You’re going to the Refugee Center?” I turn my head to the side. “Is that...bad?”

“It’s very dangerous, Ella,” Sinclair says, staring hard at me. “Those people are desperate – they will do anything to better their situations, they could seek to take advantage of you -”

“Baby,” I murmur, putting a hand on his cheek and frowning deeper while I search his face. “That’s precisely why I should go. They need help – I can help them -” He sighs and hangs his head for a moment, thinking it through. I wait, trying to be patient but unable to help feeling a little frustrated. Just yesterday he told me to find my own path, and today he’s trying to tell me that my chosen path is too dangerous?

“I just...want you to be safe,” he says, lifting his head and looking me in the eyes. My frustration flees instantly because I understand – I really do.” “We’ll be safe,” I whisper, running a hand over the stubble of his cheek. ” Isabel goes every day – and she wouldn’t put me in a situation if she thought that I -” “Wait, we?” Sinclair says, sitting up fully now and looking at me sternly. “Who is ‘we’?” “Rafe and I,” I say, sitting up on my elbows and looking up at my gigantic mate towering above me.

He laughs, derisive, and looks away. “You aren’t bringing the baby.”

I laugh right back. “Just try to stop me!”

Chapter 400 – The Refugee Center

“Ella,” Sinclair says, snapping his face back to mine, still pissed as hell at my suggestion that I’m bringing Rafe with me to the Refugee Center. “It is too dangerous – I will not let you put both of you in harm’s way like that.”

“What are you going to do, Dominic,” I say, turning my head to the side sarcastically, “strap the baby to your chest all day? Bring him to all of your meetings of state?” He looks away from me then, clenching his jaw, saying nothing because he knows I have a point. The baby has to stay with me – I’m still breastfeeding. “Exactly,” I say, heaving a little sigh and pulling myself back to my side of the bed, where I can hear Rafe starting to fuss.” We’ll be fine!”

I’m already out of the bed and lifting Rafe up, asking him about his morning and changing his diaper before Sinclair speaks again. “Can you at least take Cora with you?” he says quietly. “And Roger, if he’s free?” I turn and smile at him then, pleased that he’s not fighting me on this more than he is. “That’s actually a really good idea,” I say, smiling. “Cora will be really helpful.”

“Yes,” he sighs, turning to look at me finally. “Plus, she can zap anyone who tries to touch you.” I laugh, shaking my head and turning back to continue changing the baby. When I finish up, I feel Sinclair come close and wrap his arms around my waist. “I just want you safe, trouble,” he murmurs in apology, kissing my hair and then dipping his head to press his cheek to mine.

“I know,” I sigh. “I promise,” I say, turning in his arms and taking his cheeks in my palms, “the moment I feel anything strange, I’ll leave. Absolutely promise. All right?”

“All right,” he murmurs, nudging my nose with his. “But I’m putting a tracker somewhere in your clothes so that I can come find you if I need to. And I’m not telling you which piece of clothing so that you can’t get rid of it.” “Well then,” I murmur, pitching my voice lower. “I’ll just have to go naked.” My mate growls and bends his knees so that he can grip the back of my thighs, and then in one swift movement he stands up, yanking me with him so that my legs are wrapped around his waist. I laugh, looping my arms around his neck and moving forward for a kiss.

“Over my dead body,” he murmurs, will I let you go any where naked. Except back to bed.”

And then my sweet, overprotective Alpha mate leans in and seals his promise with a kiss.

“I’m glad you asked me to come, Ella,” Cora says as we both climb out of the SUV driven by Conner, the red- haired young man who I healed first with my powers. I was pleased to see Sinclair arranged for him to be our combination chauffer/bodyguard today

– he’s always been a bit of a favorite. ” Sorry Roger couldn’t make it,” Cora continues, leaning over to help me tighten the straps on Rafe’s little carrier. Rafe gurgles happily to see his auntie, which makes me smile. “Yeah, what’s Roger up to that he couldn’t come?” I ask, adjusting Rafe so that his weight rests comfortably on my shoulders. When we’re all ready, Conner nods to us and we start towards the Refugee Center, a squat building on the edge of the city that looks like it could do with both some repairs and some resources. “He’s all wrapped up in Sinclair’s stuff,” she sighs, “I’m surprised Sinclair didn’t realize it.

But when he steps up as King, Roger – as his Beta is going to step forward to manage the affairs of the pack that Sinclair was mostly focusing on.” ” Does he...want to do that?” I ask, hesitating. I mean, Roger’s clever and a hard worker, but Sinclair has always enjoyed the bureaucratic work more than Roger. “I don’t think so,” Cora sighs to me, shaking her head a little.

” He’s still figuring out his place. It’s something we talk about a lot.” “Well, I hope he’s not unhappy,” I murmur, suddenly worried for my brother-in-law. Roger’s a tough nut to crack, but I know he’s got a big heart beneath all his bravado. And I also know he’s so dedicated to his brother that he’ll do whatever Sinclair asks of him, even if it doesn’t make him happy.

“Oh, don’t worry too much about him,” Cora says with a little laugh as we approach the Center’s doors. “He’s got a new mate, a new baby coming along, and new bonds with both – he’s all set.”

“That’s so sweet,” I murmur, truly meaning it as I pull open the doors. But any warm and fuzzy feelings that Cora just gave me are wiped away at what I see before me. The office is...a mess. Cora, Conner, and I slowly look around, taking everything in before us. Phones are ringing off the hook, paperwork is stacked a mile high, and a long line of people winds around the room, waiting for two harried people at the desk to attend to them.

Unfortunately, those people are also working the phones. As I glance around, I also see that the room could use a nice cleaning. I’m not precisely a neat-freak...so if even I’m noticing? It’s dirty. I grimace, guilt roiling in my stomach. These people deserve better. “Follow me,” Conner murmurs, taking lead. Cora and I fall into step behind him. “Hey!” someone in the line shouts, thinking we’re cutting. “Line starts back there!” ” Apologies!” Conner calls to whoever it was, putting on his charming smile.

” We’re not cutting in line – official business.” “They should still see us first!” Someone else calls out, a man this time. But Conner just grimaces a little and ignores him, leading Cora, Rafe, and I behind the desk. A girl working the desk – dark-haired with pretty brown eyes – stands up straight in shock and surprise to see us come around.

“You can’t be back here,” she murmurs, putting a hand over the receiver of the phone so whoever she’s talking to can’t hear. “You have to wait in line” “This is Ella Sinclair,” Conner replies, stepping aside a little so that she can see me more clearly.” And her sister, Cora...Sinclair?” He says it as half a question since Cora and Roger haven’t technically been mated yet. Cora just rolls her eyes and waves a hand, as if she doesn’t know and cares even less. I give an awkward little wave to the girl, whose eyes go wide, moving between me and the baby.

I feel a sudden shyness come over me as I realizes that...well that she recognizes me. Of course I’ve long been aware that Sinclair is a public person and that as his mate people probably know who I am. But so far Sinclair has done such a good job of keeping us away from the world and the media that this is the first time I’m really aware of being publicly recognized. “Oh my god,” the girl murmurs, hanging up the phone without saying goodbye.

“Apologies, my Queen – Luna um...” she folds into a little bow, simultaneously smacking the arm of the slim blonde man next to her, who gives her a dirty look before his own eyes go wide. A whisper travels through the room and I anxiously play with Rafe’s little foot as a thrill of anxiety rolls through me. I hadn’t...realized it would be quite like this. But then Rafe gives a happy squeal, looking around cheerfully at everyone, and I smile at him realizing that he’s right. Well, he didn’t mean to be right.

But he still is. And I feel my own smile come to my face as I look around at everyone and tuck away my own shyness and anxiety, trying instead to be kind and warm and welcoming. That’s what these people need right now, instead of me cowering away in my anxiety. “Hello,” I say, directing my attention to the girl behind the counter. “Please don’t worry about any of that.

We came to help. But we’re looking for Isabel?” “ Oh,” the young blonde man says, his eyebrows going up. “Yeah, she’s out at the camps. She left early this morning.” “Where are those?” I ask. “ Not far,” he replies, but then he hesitates. “But I...they’re not nice, Luna,” he says, letting his words drift off at the end. “I’m not sure you want to ““Not nice we can handle,” Cora says breezily, flashing him a smile and then looking back to the dark-haired girl.

” Can you give us directions? I’m sure we can make it.” “Of course,” the girl says, her hands shaking a little as she sorts through the paperwork on her desk, looking for a map. As she does, I look around the room at all of the silent people who I realize are looking right at me. And I’m a little intimidated to see the variety of expressions on their faces. Some are interested, some look happy but still others look really, really mad.

Or worse, sad and betrayed. I do my best to keep my own feelings in and present a sunny demeanor to them, hoping that it’s right. It’s not that I want to smile in the face of their pain but...if I can let them see that I’m working? That I’m trying, and that good

things are coming? Isn't hope as good a medicine as any Goddess' gift? I turn back to the desk when I hear a rustle of paper and see Conner reaching forward to take a map from the girl. "Can I do anything else to help you?" she asks, directing her words to me with a still-shy but now slightly eager smile..

"No," I say, giving her a big grin and shaking my head. "But I'd like you to please make a list of improvements you'd make to this place. Abiglist – don't hold back, okay?"

The girl glances at her colleague and both of their faces brighten, which starts a warm little spot in my belly burning. "Okay," she agrees. "Someone will come get it this afternoon," I say, nodding to them, letting them see it's a promise. "And then we'll get started making this place better." They're both smiling widely at me now as I say my goodbyes and then head back out of the door with my sister, my baby, and my bodyguard.

Some people wave to us as we go and I wave back, but as we pass through the doors the only thing that settles in me is resolve. "We have to do something to help these people," I say to Cora as we move to the car. She nods stoically at my side, agreeing. "But Ella," she says, hesitating a little, "I think that in there? It's just scratching the surface." And as we get into the car and start to drive away, I find that I agree. And that I'm a little afraid of what we're going to see next.

Chapter 401 – The Camps

Ella

Someone must have called ahead because when we pull up to the refugee camp I see Isabel standing outside the gates, her arms crossed over her chest and a big smile on her face. I give a little squeal of excitement when I see her, my hand immediately going to the lever on the car door. “Seriously, Ella,” Cora murmurs, grabbing my other wrist. “Let’s not leap out of the moving vehicle just because we see our friends.” “Ohhh,” I say, tossing her a little glare over my shoulder.

“I’m not that dumb, Cora -” “You’ve done it before,” she sighs. “Once!” I snap, giving her a real glare and then quickly moving to unbuckle myself and then Rafe, getting him strapped to my chest as fast as I can when the car stops. The result of the delay is that Isabel pulls open my door the moment I turn around, ready to grab the handle again. “Ella!” she shouts, laughing already, and I burst out of the car, wrapping my friend in a one-armed hug, kind of regretting that I already strapped Rafe to me so that I can’t hold her properly.

“Isabel!” I gasp, giving her a big kiss on the cheek. “It issogood to see you!”

“And you, friend,” she says, sighing a little in relief that looks like it was a long time coming. “We were all going crazy when we didn’t hear from you for so long and we got some of the details, but no one really knows what happened? Some kind of...attack?” “It’s an insane story,” I say, rolling my eyes as Cora and Conner come around the car. “I’ll tell you all about it, but it needs a long telling, so maybe...not now,” I say, glancing over at the refugee camp. “All right,” she nods, still looking at me.

“But you’re okay? Things are...steady?” “We’re fine, everyone’s fine,” I say, running a hand over my baby’s hair. “Things are steady for now.” I give a little shrug, letting her know that that’s all we’ve got. She smiles at me and nods, understanding, and then takes a moment to fuss over Rafe, telling him how big he got, and then giving Cora a kiss on the cheek as well. As Isabel hugs Cora, she pauses and steps back, looking down at her- belly. “Are you...”

“Yes, yes,” Cora says, laughing, “though I’m not sure I’m used to people being able to smell it on me.”

“But,” Isabel’s eyes go wide as she looks sup into Cora’s face. “This baby...is a pup?” Cora laughs and shrugs a little. “Listen, it’s complicated. But yeah.... I’m a human with a wolf soul and I’m pregnant with a hybrid mostly-wolf baby.” Isabel blinks in surprise and then laughs, narrowing her eyes at her. “It’s Roger’s isn’t it?” she asks, grinning.

Cora laughs again, harder now and blushing to be called out. “God,” she says, running a hand through her hair, “were wethatobvious in Vanara?”

“To everyone but yourselves, apparently,” Isabel says, smirking at her. And then she turns her attention to Conner. “And who are you?” “A bit of a new addition,” he says, rubbing his hair awkwardly but giving her a smile anyway. “My name is Conner, I’m a sergeant in the pack,” he says, nodding to us to let her know which one. “And are you single?”

Isabel asks, looking him up and down as she folds her arms over her chest. Conner, bless him, blushes bright red as I burst into laughter and shove my friend on her shoulder. “Isabel!” I laugh, shaking my head at her. “You’d have bitten my head off if I asked that of you the moment I met you.” “Well, I’m different now,” she says, grinning at me. “More romantic, now that I see how much it turned my life around. after tragedy. I’m a meddler by nature,” she says, giving me a wink before turning back to him. “So?”

she prods. “Yes, ma’am,” he murmurs down towards his feet, smiling a little.” I am single.” “Good,” she says, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder and then turning with all of us towards the gates. “We’ll see what we can do about that.” And then, together, Isabel walks us towards the gates. As we pass through them, I see her mood change just a little bit as she looks at my sister and I warily.

“I know you’ve seen some tough things, Ella, Cora,” she says, but I do want you to be prepared for what you’re walking into.” I frown at her. “Please,” I say, shaking my head. ” Don’t hold back. We want to help -we have resources now -” “I know,” she says, placing a hand on my arm. “I just these people have been through a lot. This is not going to be a walk in the park.” “That’s all right,” Cora says with a sigh, starting to look around, her hands on her hips.

“We’ve never been park people, really. We like the beach.” “All right, then,” Isabel says, nodding and starting forward. “Let’s get started.” She fills us in on her family as we begin to walk, letting us know that James is well and – interestingly – at the palace today, enough – reconnecting with Sinclair and seeing if there’s a place for him in the administration.

A beautiful smile takes over Isabel’s face when she tells us about Sadie, even though I don’t think she knows it. The little girl is apparently growing like a weed and a fast learner, eager for every picture book she can get her hands on. While all of this news about my friend’s family warms my heart to its core, that heat fades from me the deeper we get into the camp. Isabel gives us a thorough tour, taking us down row after row of tents where families live together, scrapping together their world as best they can. “How did these people get here,” Cora murmurs, confused. “Well, this is the Wolf Camp,” Isabel says quietly, “the Human Camp is across the river -” ” What?” I ask, a little appalled. “You’re keeping them separate?”

“I’mnot keeping them separate,’ Isabel says, turning to me with narrowed eyes. ”

They demanded separate accommodations.”

“Oh,” I sigh, realizing that that makes sense but disappointed nonetheless.” But anyway, these wolves are all people who had their home destroyed during the war and don’t have family to take them in, or have no way to get to that family, or who otherwise don’t have access to the resources they need to get their lives back together.” “Why the fences?” Cora asks, looking around at the tall chain-link fences all around the perimeter with barbed wire on top.

“They’re not to keep the people in,” Isabel sighs, “people can come and go as they please. The fences are here to keep other people out.”

“Who?” I ask, a little appalled, my hand instantly going to Rafe in my sudden fear. “Stragglers, mostly,” she says, shrugging to me. “There’s probably a better word for it – but there are plenty of people – both human and wolf – who do not like the way that services are being distributed to refugees, and who believe that they can do it better on their own. Still, they need supplies as well, and many don’t hesitate to prey on those within this camp if they can get in.”

“Oh my god,” I sigh, looking around at all of the poor people around us, dozens and hundreds of them living in tents, doing their best just to survive after the war took everything from them. “Will you...will you take me to the human camps too?” “I will,” she says, biting her lip and looking up at me. “Though...they may not be as happy to see you as you think.” “Because I’m a wolf?” I ask quietly. Slowly, she nods.

“The humans have felt deeply betrayed by all of this, and I can’t say I blame them,” Isabel sighs. “It’s wonderful that human and wolf governments are able to come to a cease -fire, but the realization that this entire city is under wolf jurisdiction and that wolves have for a long time considered humans second-class citizens, if not...worse,” she shrugs, clearly frustrated with it and without solutions regarding how to make it better. “It’s not good.”

“Still,” I say quietly, looking at Cora, who nods to me. “I want to go.”

“Okay,” Isabel says quietly, and then she turns to look me in the eye, glancing down at Rafe. “But there’s something I want you to see first. Actually,” she turns to Cora now, meeting her eyes, “I’m more eager for you to see it, considering your medical experience.”

Cora smiles and glances at me, making Isabel frown a little bit, but Cora just waves a hand. “We’ll fill you in,” she says briefly, nodding to Isabel, “but you may want Ella now even more than you want me, if it’s something medical.

But please, lead the way.” Isabel does, silent and stern as she takes us towards a large brown tent towards the front of the camps. She takes a deep breath as she pulls back

the flap, and then we all step inside. And my heart sinks down to the very pit of my stomach. Because the tent is absolutely filled with children.

Chapter 402 – The Children’s Tent

There are dozens of children in this tent – maybe hundreds – and my heart breaks as I look them over. Each of the children is laying in on a medical cot, being tended to by a very tiny staff of medical and social workers who look run off their feet. “Oh my god, Isabel,” I murmur, my heart going immediately into my throat.

“Who are...who are all of these children...” “They’re the pups of the camp who are sick,” she says quietly. “Some of them have parents,” she says, nodding to a couple who are sitting quietly by their daughter’s bed, reading her a book even though the little girl can barely pay attention because she’s whimpering with pain. ” But a lot of them,” Isabel says, taking my hand and drawing my attention back to her, “a lot of them are alone.

The rest of the orphans have already gone to the adoption center in the city, but these ones -” “They need help,” I say, my voice tight, determined. “Yes,” she says quietly. And then she turns her eyes to Cora. “Can you...would you be willing to spend some time here? We can use all the hands we’ve got.” ” You’ll want both of us,” Cora says, turning to me to consult. And I nod to her, but turn back to Isabel first. “Are there children like this in the human camp as well?”

I ask quietly. “Yes,” she replies. “A tent as big as this, filled. Maybe bigger.” “Okay,” I say, my heart breaking. But that resolve in me that started earlier, it hardens. “Here today? The other camp tomorrow?” I ask, looking up at Cora, who twists her lips, judging the number of people in the room. “It depends on the severity of the cases,” she murmurs, crossing her arms. “What are you talking about?” Isabel asks, looking between us and then up at Conner, frowning. You’re about to see something very cool,” Conner replies, giving her a soft smile.

“But just... let them work. They’ve got their own system.” Isabel turns to me with a frown, but I just dip a little kiss to my baby’s head and then get started. Cora and I fall immediately into the routine we set up when we were healing the men in the bunker after their battles. She begins by speaking with one of the doctors about the worst cases and as I put Conner to work as a nurse – my old job going bed to bed and speaking to the children and their families (if they have them) with a notepad, noting those who seem most in danger or in the most pain. I move around too, mostly saying hello to people, letting them see the baby, getting the feel of the room with Isabel at my side to show me how things work. But that doesn’t last long, because Cora comes back to me pretty fast. “Come on, Ella,” she says, taking my hand and leading me to the far corner of the tent. “We need to act now. This one is...very bad.” And so we get to work.

The time slips by very quickly as we go from bed to bed, coordinating with the doctors and social workers already on staff to ensure that we’re doing the best work that we can in the short time that we have available. But generally, we fall into a pretty stable routine of me healing the children while Cora and Isabel consult to determine who is next. Conner takes Rafe while I heal, ensuring that he’s content when he’s away from me.

"He's a really good baby," Conner murmurs to me the fifth or sixth time that he takes Rafe from me and tucks him happily away in the crook of his arm. "He's...very chill. I wasn't expecting that." "Well," I sigh, smiling up at him, "Rafe likes his dad better than me and you probably remind him of Sinclair. You're both..." I wave a hand towards Conner's large, muscular frame, "gigantic and stuff. Probably thinks he's right at home!" "I can't believe that's true," Conner says casually, grinning down at Rafe.

Everyone loves the Luna." As if in confirmation, Rafe gives a happy little squeal and reaches out a hand to me, which I kiss. I look back up at Conner." You'll let me know? If he needs anything?" "Always," Conner murmurs, giving me a little wink and stepping away with the baby, who tucks his face away against Conner's chest, apparently getting ready for a nap. And so I turn my attention away, heading over to the little girl who looks up at me with wide eyes in a pale face. "Hi," I say, smiling and sitting next to her, taking her hand. "What's your name?"

"Leah," she says, the word barely audible as it escapes through her cracked lips. "Well, Leah," I say, smiling as I lean closer. "I know you've been feeling pretty badly lately, but I'm going to help you feel better, if that's okay with you." Slowly, Leah nods and closes her eyes, leaning back against her pillows. I squeeze her hand a little as I glance towards the empty chair next to her, my heart breaking as I consider that she has no parent to come sit with her.

But I brush my grief for this little girl aside, because it's not going to do her any good, and then I close my eyes and access my mother's gift, letting it sweep through me first and then into her, where I find...quite a lot of damage done. "This one might take a while," I say, feeling Isabel's presence by my side. "That's all right, Luna," she replies quietly, and I smile a little to hear her say that name. "You take your time."

Leah's injuries are extensive she's battered and bruised from her experiences either during the war or from her time here in the camp. But I also find something... darker, deeper within her. I don't know anything, really, about biology or what organs I'm sensing in her as ill (and I make a mental note to immediately get some books or take some courses on the subject) but it doesn't really matter.

The gift, in its grace, can sense when something is wrong – and it knows how to fix it. I'm really, in all things, just the conduit. But as I put the gift to work, I'm so, so grateful to my mother for letting me be the conduit for this particular gift. It's almost as if she knew it would bring me a personal joy to be able to help in this way.

It does take a long time for the gift to do its work, to heal a long lesion within what I think is – maybe? – Leah's liver. And then, when that's all patched up, the gift flows through her body and slowly knits up all the cuts and bruises on her and at the last works to gently eradicate what feel like...well, tiny little dots in her body, which are just wrong.

Oroff.

I don't know how else to explain it. When I finally open my eyes, I look down at Leah's hand still in my own and smile to see that it's already warmer than it was when I started. And I look up, my smile deepening when I see that she's peacefully asleep, a little smile on her face. My heart squeezes as I hope that she's dreaming, and that her dreams are wonderful.

"Okay," I murmur, sighing and standing up, surprised to find my body stiff. "Let's let her rest." I turn then and am a little surprised to see Isabel standing there, staring at me in shock. "What..." she mutters, "what did you just do?" "I healed her," I say simply, giving a little shrug, understanding that it's going to take her some time to comprehend. We told her about the Goddess' gift before we got started but I'm well aware that it's one thing to hear about it and quite another to see it work. "How long was I ...out?" "Over an hour," Cora snaps, striding over to us and giving me a little glare. "What?" I ask, my eyes going wide. And then I groan a little, because that's...that's way too long. If I spend an hour on each of these children...

"Well, if you'd simply did what I told you to do," Cora says, glaring at me some more, "andjusthealed her liver- her body could have done the rest over the next few days, or we could have come back -"

"There's no way," I say, my voice shaking a little with emotion as I return Cora's glare, "absolutelyno wayI was letting this little girl suffer for one more moment."

"Well," Cora says, opening her eyes wide and waving a hand to encompass the rest of the room. "You healed her, every little bump and bruise, and in doing so let all the seother children continue to suffer. Some of which reallyneedyou, Ella."

And my heart sinks as I look around and realize that she's right. My eyes snap back to my sister's and the guilt overtakes me, knocking out my anger like a tidal wave as I think of every little kid in each of these beds, quietly suffering, waiting for me – And quite suddenly, I burst into tears.

Chapter 403 – An Angry King

“Oh, Ella,” Cora sighs, her shoulders slumping as she sees my reaction to her words. She strides over to me and wraps me in a big hug. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs into my hair, “I shouldn’t have said it like that.” “No,” I sniff, you’re right – I should have listened – ”

“It’s okay. You did so good by her,” Cora says, loosening her grip and turning me towards the little girl asleep in her bed. “She wasn’t going to make it, Ella,” Cora whispers as we look down at the girl. “Not even a few more days maybe not even through the night. And look at her now.”

Tears are streaming freely down my cheeks now. “She’s perfect,” I murmur, and Cora nods.

“So, you did a good thing,” she sighs, wiping at my tears in her own brusque way, “but we still have work to do. All right?”

“Okay,” I say nodding and looking around the room. “Who’s next?” “A little boy,” she says, looking down at her clipboard. “Named Philip.” “A sweet little boy!” I gasp, and then I bury my face in my hands and start crying again, thinking of my own sweet baby – and if he ever got sick – “Ella,” Cora sighs next to me, and I hear her take a deep steadying breath.

“We are not going to get through this if you keep crying all the time.” “I can’t help it,” I sniff, looking up at her and wiping again at my tears, which just seem to keep coming. “Do you think...if these kids don’t have a home, Sinclair will...” “If you go home tonight and ask Sinclair to adopt all these kids,” she says slowly, raising her eyebrows and shaking her head at me, though unable to keep a smile from starting on her lips, “he’s gonna flip, Ella.” “But - ”

“Move on, kid!” she laughs, giving me a little push between the shoulder blades to keep me moving. “Let’s go help Philip!”

“Philip,” I say, taking a deep breath and nodding steadily, trying to put my motherly impulse to save and keep and raise all the children away, though it is very difficult. We don’t have far to go, but as we walk I take my baby from Conner’s arms, even though I know I’ll have to give him back in about two seconds.

“What do you think, baby,” I murmur to Rafe, looking down and watching him sleep, warmth crawling through me and chasing away my sadness as I look down into his perfect little face. “Should we bring home about a dozen new orphan siblings for you today? Do you think daddy will be mad?”

Conner drops Cora off first and then drives us back to the palace. To my extreme disappointment, I was convinced not to bring any children back with me tonight, so it’s

just me and Rafe in the car with him. Conner surprises me by driving around to the back of the palace and pressing a button at the top of the car, opening a wide black door.

“Oh,” I say, leaning forward curiously. “So there is a garage...”

Conner laughs a little and confirms my suspicions. As he pulls into a parking spot very close to what I assume is the entrance, I place a hand on his shoulder. “You did really well today, Conner,” I say softly. “Thank you, Luna,” he says, flashing me a smile. “You should...” and I hesitate here, not really knowing what to say. “I should what?” he asks, curious. “Well, I know that you’re part of the military,” say, taking my hand away and twisting my fingers together anxiously, “and I know that you probably have all sorts of ambitions there, but...well, if you’d like to be part of my team, even just for now, and help me continue doing this work, we’d be really happy to have you.”

I smile at him, hoping it’s an offer he’ll consider, and hoping even more that it doesn’t derail his own plans. “I’ll think about it, Luna,” he says, meeting my eyes with a very genuine smile. “I promise I will.” And then we both nod at each other and get out of the car, me unstrapping the baby and leaving his car seat where it is – because he’s just going to need it tomorrow anyway.

Conner leads me through the winding halls beneath the palace to an elevator, which we climb into. He presses a button and swipes a card from his pocket and, when it reaches the second floor, I’m very surprised to find us in the hallway where my personal rooms are. “Oh,” I say, my eyebrows arching almost to my hairline. “Well, that’s terribly convenient, isn’t it?” “Only the best for our Queen,” Conner says, gesturing forward so that I can step out ahead of him. I smile at him and do so, but frown and turn when he stays in the elevator. “You aren’t coming?” Nah,” he says, smiling at me and shrugging. “I’ve got to get back to the barracks, Luna. Have to get some rest so that I’m fresh tomorrow.

I roll my eyes at myself – of course. What was I thinking, that he was going to come and hang out with me and Sinclair? I wave goodbye to him and wish him a good night’s sleep, considering that I’ll just have to give my own report to Sinclair, even though I figured Conner would handle it.

But still. I can handle that, right? As long as I don’t fall asleep on my feet first. But when I push open the door to our suite, I can tell already that Sinclair is mad. Frowning, I close the door behind me, looking towards where he sits at his new desk by the window, already glowering at me with his arms crossed. “What is it?” I ask, confused.

“Ella,” Sinclair snaps, standing and striding over to me as he gestures to the darkness outside the window. “You were gone all day- and while I don’t care about that, you didn’t answer your phone the entire time -”

"My phone," I say, frowning up at him and passing the baby over to the arms he holds out, silently asking for him. "I don't even think I brought it

"Yes," Sinclair growls, frowning down at me even as he lifts Rafe to his shoulder and begins to lovingly stroke his back, welcoming him home and giving me a lecture at the same time. "I realized that you left your phone behind after panicking for three hours that something had happened to you."

"Why didn't you just contact Conner?" "I did!" "Well then what's the problem?" I ask, exhausted and crossing my arms over my chest, truly not getting it and honestly maybe too tired to try.

"The problem," he growls, turning to give Rafe a kiss on the cheek and run his eyes over him, ensuring that he's okay – which, of course, he is. "Is that I was hesitant about you even going to the Refugee Center, let alone staying there all day- "

"Well, we didn't go to the Center all day," I murmur, turning away from him and heading to our expansive closet which is basically a second bedroom where we keep all of our stuff in beautiful, neat little cabinets and racks. "We went to the Wolf Camp almost immediately." "WHAT!" I turn to glare at my mate where he stands at the door. "I don't know why you're freaking out, Dominic," I snap, starting to lose my patience a little bit. "We were totally fine, and -"

"It's incredibly dangerous in those camps," Sinclair says, storming forward to loom over me. "I don't want you and Rafe there where anything could happen -"

"Too bad," I say, objecting to the command in his voice and crossing my arms, looking up at him stubbornly and slowly shaking my head. "Because we're going back tomorrow. Actually, not back – we're going to the Human Camp" And then I see Sinclair's face turn a shade of red I've never seen before. I blink in surprise, taking a step back as I watch him just get...angrier and angrier. My breath hitches in my throat – not because I'm actually afraid I know he'd never hurt me – but I've just never...pushed him this far.

Chapter 404 – Balance

“Dominic,” I murmur, reaching for him. “No,” he snaps, taking a step away from me and shaking his head. “You’re taking this too far, Ella – I know you want to help, but I cannot have you putting yourself at risk like this!” He sputters for a moment, turning away from me and hanging his head, bringing a hand up to cover his face.

I reach for him, seeking him through our bond, not understanding this reaction and needing to know –

He opens his heart to me when I gently ask him to through the bond. He lets me see all of his fear, all of his anxiety, all of the guilt that already rolls in him when he even thinks about the possibility of losing Rafe and I when he could just keep us so safe-

And my heart breaks, for what feels like the eightieth time today, as I stare at my mate’s back, his broad shoulders.

“I’m so sorry, Dominic,” I whisper, closing the distance between us and wrapping my arms around his waist from behind, resting my head against his back, closing my eyes. “I hear you feel your fear for me. But I...I can’t not do this....”

“Ella,” he says, his voice cracking with the strain of his worry, of not understanding why I’m pushing this so hard-

But before he can continue, I let out a deep breath and pass him my own feelings down the bond and along with them, the memories I have from today. Of little Leah, and her sunken pale face, and how fresh her skin looked after I spent an hour holding her hand. And little Philip, who lost a hand, and whose wound was badly infected-

Who will never grow that hand back, but who now will live, and be fitted with a prosthesis, and live a full life –

And the memories of a dozen other children who I helped – who need me, 1 who aren’t safe unless I’m there to help them. The bare idea that I would ever, ever give that up, just to keep my own self safe?

It’s absolutely unthinkable to me.

“You’re forgetting who you chose as your mate, Dominic,” I murmur, my arms still wrapped tight around him.” Please, please don’t ask me to turn away from them. I can’t do it – not when I’m the only one who can help them like this. The only one who can really take away their pain.”

Sinclair turns towards me then, staying so close that I’m able to keep my arms around his waist, and he settles his free arm around my shoulders, Rafe still curled up in

his other. As I look up at him I see that his eyes are wet with tears. I reach up a hand to gently wipe away the ones that start to fall down his cheeks. "All right, Ella," he says, his voice gruff. But then he shakes his head at me, not giving in completely. "I see it now – I understand and...and you're right, to hold you back from this would be to ask you to betray who you are. And who you are is the reason I love you. I get it."

I nod, looking up at him, sending a pulse of love and gratitude down our bond. Because I really am just so grateful to be with a man who understands who I really am, down to the core of my being. And more than that a man who is willing to bend, even though he's never been a particularly pliant person, when I tell him what I need.

"But we're doing this on my terms," he continues, a little bit of his growl coming back to his voice even as it's still thick with emotion, and worry, and tears. "All right?" "All right," I whisper, agreeing to it freely because I know he's already given in so much. It's my term now. "Your terms, Dominic. Whatever you say." "Damn right, whatever I say," he snarls, a little playfully, and I grin up at him, loving it – loving him. And I raise myself on my toes, tilting my head back, hoping for a kiss – which he gives me, freely. A good long one that tells me how much he loves me, but also how much he intends to protect me, to keep me safe. Even if I insist on going into what are essentially war zones every day."

Trouble, through and through," he sighs when I finally pull away, just an inch. "You've known that for a long time, big scary Alpha," I murmur back, giving him a smart smack on his rear that makes him jump a little and then laugh. "Thought you'd be used to it by now." "Yeah," he sighs, letting me loose a bit. "Me too." And then he starts a bit as I pull away further now, looking down at his crisp white shirt which is now...well, not so crisp, or so white, but instead covered in a fine layer of brown dirt.

"What the hell did you do to me..." he murmurs. "It's really dirty at those camps," I sigh, stepping away and crossing my fingers. "I'm sorry – was the shirt expensive? I didn't mean to -" And then he laughs, giving me my own smack on the ass and nodding towards the door in our closet which also delightfully leads to the bathroom. "Shower, immediately," he sighs, "filthy girl."

I laugh and give him a wink as I saunter away from the door, "you like me filthy," I call over my shoulder, "and you know it." "Don't listen to your mother," Sinclair murmurs, pretending to cover Rafe's ears. I laugh as I start to pass into the bathroom. "We're not done talking!" he calls after me. "Didn't think we were!" I call back, and then – happy – I strip off my clothes, looking forward to a nice, long, hot shower.

About an hour later, after I've showered and eaten the food that Sinclair ordered up for me, we're finally settled in bed in the dark. Or, the near-dark as I lit a little magnolia-scented candle on my bedside table, wanting to be able to see the changes in his face as we talk.

He's so handsome, I think, smiling at him over our baby, who rests between us, babbling little nonsense words and grabbing his feet as he rolls around on his back. Why wouldn't I want to stare at him whenever I can?

Perhaps intuiting my line of thinking, my mate smiles back at me and reaches out a hand, slowly letting his thumb drift over the line of my cheek. I turn my head a little and kiss that thumb, hoping he knows how well I love him. But...well, I think he does. Because I know just how much he loves me – he shows me every day. I very much hope that I do the same for him.

"So what's your plan, trouble," he murmurs, his deep voice so resonant that I can almost feel the vibrations of it through the mattress. Rafe turns towards his father, laughing a little with joy at the sound of it. I smile and stroke my baby's belly, pleased at how much he loves the sound of his daddy's voice. "I need a team," I whisper, looking up and meeting his eyes. "A big one," he agrees. "I'm not letting you go there again with just Conner, Ella. I know that you believe in the good in everyone but there are people out there who would hurt you."

"Okay," I agree, nodding once. "But...can I have Conner?" "Do you like him?" Sinclair asks, tilting his head to the side. "Should I be jealous?" And I laugh, reaching out and giving him a smack on the shoulder. "Don't be ridiculous," I murmur. "But no, he was very good and helpful today. And he's nice, and Rafe likes him too." I shrug. "But...I don't want to derail his career. Would it be bad, to bring him on board with me?" "Not necessarily," Sinclair answers, thinking as he speaks.

"It would be a diversion from his current plans but," he shrugs, "if he does well protecting the Queen, it could be quite a good mark in his favor. Would you like me to speak with him?" "Very much," I say, my eyebrows going up. All right," he murmurs. "Who else?" "Cora," I say quickly, though I bite my lip. "If she can be drawn away from the Clinic, which...well, which Roger might like. But also..." I laugh a little, looking up at my mate. "I want Hank too, if I can have him." "How long are you anticipating this project will take?" he murmurs, frowning at me.

"Hank might be willing to leave the clinic for a few days to help an emergency refugee situation, but he's very passionate about the work he's doing there. I don't see him leaving it not willingly." "Well, I don't want to ask him to do that," I sigh, looking up at the ceiling as I think it through. "Isabel, certainly, I need. What about James? Did you...did you have a good talk with him today?"

"Yes," Sinclair says, and I turn my eyes back to him. "Though I'm afraid I want him myself, Ella, unless you can make a good argument for why no one else can take his place on your team. I want him to train as an ambassador." "Really?" I ask, my eyes going a bit wide. "But he's ...military..." "He's also smart,"

Sinclair counters, “and charming, and good with people, and trustworthy. And we may be in a situation in the future where an ambassador who knows the ways of war is going to be quite an asset. “Do you want to send him to Venda?” I ask quietly. Slowly, Sinclair shakes his head. “Or major problem,” he murmurs, “is still with Atalaxia.” And I go cold as I realize that...well, that I forgot all about Atalaxia – this incredible force looming behind us. But as I look into my mate’s eyes, I realize that he hasn’t forgotten about it – not for a second. And that, even if Sinclair’s worried about me? The main focus of his worry is on this other nation that’s still harboring my uncle, and very well might be planning to support Xander in his desire to take our child.

Chapter 405 – Pillow plans

I sigh, closing my eyes for a second. “I forgot all about the Atalaxians,” I murmur.

“You’ve had a long day,” Sinclair replies, even though that’s not really an excuse. Not for a Queen, who needs to balance it all. I take a moment to collect my thoughts before opening my eyes and looking at him again.

“What I want,” I say quietly, “is a big team to go solve a lot of the overarching problems with the refugees. Doctors, lawyers, social workers anyone who can help us start to patch the big problems there, to get these camps functioning not as a holding space but as a system that helps people get back to their lives, or start new ones.”

I think more on his question of how long I think this will take. “But once that’s done...” I shrug a little, “I won’t need such a big team, once that’s accomplished. But I still want systems in place that help people, and I want to run them. Would that be...possible?”

“I think it’s very possible,” Sinclair says seriously, reaching out a hand to stroke my hair. “And I think it’s very good of you to want to do it. When do you want to start?”

“Tomorrow,” I say, my eyes going wide. “I need to go to the Human Camp – I need to see if anyone there needs to be healed immediately, especially the children – ”

Sinclair laughs, shaking his head at me. I make a little squeak of protest at his wanting to delay me, but he shakes his head, letting me know that I’m misinterpreting him. “I’ll make sure you have the bodyguards to do it, first thing in the morning. The lawyers and social workers – they’ll take a bit longer. Is that all right?”

“Yes!” I breathe, suddenly incredibly excited. And then my eyes fill with tears again as I smile at my mate, as I scooch closer across the gigantic bed until our baby is frankly squeezed between us, wanting to be close to my mate and our child at the same time. “Thank you, Dominic.”

“Of course, Ella,” he says, kissing me on the forehead. We stay like that for a long moment, passing love between our bond in a steady loop, each of us connecting with Rafe so that he feels it too. He gives us a contented little burble in reply.

“Although Ella,” Sinclair murmurs, making me look up at him.

“What?” I ask, curious and a little worried. “This time?” he says, leaning in to hold my gaze, making sure he hears me. “You’re taking your phone.”

And I laugh, nodding and tucking my head under his chin, perfectly happy and excited about our new plans. Okay, love,” I sigh, content. “I’ll take my phone. I promise.”

Cora

I'm completely beat that evening as I unlock the door to our little house – but even if I'm almost too exhausted to feel my own feet beneath me, I can't help but smile as my key twists in the lock. My key, I think, grinning. My lock. My house!

As I push the door open and look around, I still can't quite believe it – that Ella and Sinclair gave us this house, that it's really ours. At first it felt a lot like Roger and I were just living here, that it was just a loaner or something.

But as every day passes, and we feel more and more relaxed here....

Well. It starts to settle in. That this is my home, with my mate.

And I smile down at my belly, running a hand over it even though I'm not showing at all. Because in a couple of months, we're going to bring a little baby home here. And he's going to grow up calling this place home.

And it's such a rich, wonderful anticipation that...well, I lose my breath a bit, I'm so happy. But I inhale deeply and look up when I hear my mate at the top of the stairs.

"Hey," Roger says, smiling widely and starting to hurry down them, eager to be at my side. He reaches me almost in an instant, pushing the door shut behind me in the same moment that he wraps and arm around my waist and kisses me.

And I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back, smiling as I do so – because this, too, feels a little unreal, especially after the horrible things that I saw today. Roger, mine, my mate – waiting for me, in our house.

How the hell did I get so lucky?

"Where you been, gorgeous?" Roger murmurs, moving his face back from mine just an inch, his arms still wrapped around my waist. "I was surprised you weren't home when I got here."

"I know," I sigh, shaking my head a little. "It was...a crazier day than I thought it would be."

"Really," he says, surprised. "What happened?" And then he lets me go, moving to the door to twist the lock and then taking my hand, leading me into the kitchen where I'm sure that there's some kind of takeout waiting for me.

"We went to the refugee camp, the one with the wolves," I tell him, smiling with pleasure as my suspicions are confirmed. Roger opens the fridge and pulls out some packages of

my favorite Thai noodles. He starts to put them into a bowl for me as I sit down at the table and continue. "There were so many children there who needed help. Ella healed the ones who needed it most – but it was...it was a lot."

"I'm surprised to hear that," Roger replies, bringing me my food along with a big glass of cold water. "Well – or maybe not to hear it. But I'm surprised that I didn't know that it was so bad that so many children were suffering. That seems like the sort of thing that Sinclair would be on top of."

"We've been gone for long time, and we've been distracted," I say, starting to slurp up the noodles eagerly, so hungry that I'm unable to help myself from being messy. But in my heart, I know Roger couldn't care less, so I allow myself to dig in and indulge. "I guess Sinclair didn't have all of his information systems in place to give him all the details."

"Are you guys going back?" Roger asks, curious, and I hear a little hesitation in his voice.

"Yes," I reply, continuing to eat as I look up at him. "Tomorrow, if we can. But to the human camps. There's just... so much to do. So many people who need immediate help – and Ella really can provide that immediate care that other doctors can't. And she needs me," I say, giving a little shrug, "or else she'll have an emotional breakdown over each and every kid." I smirk, remembering how she was today. "And try to adopt them."

Roger laughs at this, shaking his head a little, because he knows Ella's personality well enough by this point to understand exactly what I mean. But then he quietly looks at the floor, raising my suspicions.

"What?" I ask, putting my fork down and waiting. Because I know there's something he's not saying. Roger just sighs and looks up at me. "Can't you guess?"

"You're worried," I reply, shaking my head a little. "That it's too dangerous."

"Knew you were clever," he says with a cheeky wink. I open my mouth to protest but Roger just raises a hand, asking me to wait. And, obliging my dear mate, I do. After a moment he starts again.

"I trust you, Cora," he says, taking a deep breath. "But you are pregnant. And even beyond the baby, you're aware that I'm..." he shrugs and I smile already, anticipating the joke, "mildly fond of you."

I laugh aloud and he grins at me, holding my gaze. "Cora, after everything that we've been through, you know it would kill me if anything happened to you, right? So, would you mind if I asked Sinclair to ensure that you're going to these camps with a heavy

guard?"

I open my mouth to agree instantly, but then I hesitate.

"What?" Roger asks, encouraging me to speak.

"I don't mind the guards," I say honestly, "but we're going to the human camp. And...I wonder if it's good for us to show up with like, twenty wolves to help a group of people who patently distrust wolves."

"A good point," he says, nodding and looking off into the distance a little. "I'll bring it up with Sinclair. But do you mind, overall?" he asks, looking back at me again, "the idea of an increased guard?"

"I do not," I say, smiling at him and giving a little shrug. "Though I imagine Sinclair's already got it planned."

"That's what's nice about having an Alpha brother," Roger says, laughing a little. "He solves your problems before you even know they existed."

"He also gives you houses," I point out, reaching for my glass of water and taking a big gulp.

"Yeah..." Roger says, hesitating and rubbing the back of his neck, looking down at the floor.

"What?" I ask, picking up on a hesitation in Roger's voice that's new to me. I stand up, finished with my noodles and go to stand next to my mate at his place leaning against the granite countertop. "What's wrong?"

"Are you ready to get pissed off?" he asks, looking up at me through his eyelashes a bit.

I cross my arms, saying nothing, just waiting for my mate to continue.

Chapter 406 – Meet Me There

Cora

Roger's silent for a long time, smirking at me, making me answer.

"I make no promises," I reply after a long moment, shaking my hair back in a lofty way that makes him laugh. "But seriously, what is it?"

"Well," Roger sighs, letting his shoulders drop and looking at me squarely now that some of the tension is gone. "Sinclair wants to give us more than a house now. He also wants to give us...a wedding."

My jaw drops a little. "A wedding?" I ask, baffled. "But we're...we're wolves," I say, wrinkling my nose. "Or at least – mostly wolf," I say, glancing down at my belly where my little hybrid baby is growing.

"Yeah, he wants it to be a wedding and a mating ceremony at once – a symbolic uniting of the wolf and human worlds. Because I'm a wolf," he says, pointing to himself, "and you're a human," he continues, pointing to me. "Or at least, sort of."

I still shake my head, confused.

"And he wants it to be on TV," he says, grimacing as he drops the final bomb, "like a royal wedding, for the entire world to see."

And, just as Roger predicted, I immediately get very, very pissed off.

"This is such bullshit," I murmur, pulling my cell phone out of my back pocket and immediately starting to text Ella to tell her precisely what I think of this plan.

"Wait," Roger says, laughing a little and reaching for the phone, "just give it a minute -"

"Are you seriously on board with this?" I snap, looking up at him, my anger transferring immediately from my sister to my mate. "After I've told you, like a thousand times, that I want our mating ceremony – whatever it is 1 to be special, and meaningful? I mean, if we were just going to do it any old way we would have done it by now

"Cora," Roger says, drawing my attention away from my tirade and covering my phone with his hand, stepping close to me, "I am on board with whatever it is you want, all right? So, let's put the phone and the rage away for a few minutes and just talk about this. But no one is going to force you to do anything you don't want to, okay?"

I take a deep breath then, turning towards my mate and putting my phone on the counter, sliding it away from me. "Okay," I agree, nodding but looking down at the floor.

“What’s up,” he murmurs, putting his hands on my hips and pulling me close, resting his forehead against mine. “Why did that make you so angry? It was just an idea.”

“Because,” I sigh, sorting through my emotions as best I can. “Because what we have, Roger,” I continue, putting my hands on his chest, “it’s so important to me. It’s – it’s the best thing I’ve got, and so much more than I ever thought I wanted, or could ever have.”

Roger makes a soft, sweet noise of understanding then, drawing me closer and wrapping his arms around me.

“And it’s not that I don’t want to help Ella,” I say, my voice slightly muffled against his shoulder, “and like...the nation, or whatever. I just...this is important to me. I want it to be right, just this one thing.”

“All right,” Roger murmurs, his arms wrapping me up even tighter, making me smile. “I understand, and I agree. It’s a no for us.”

“I’ll tell her, okay?” I whisper, and I feel him nod his head. And then, sighing with relief that I have him on my side and that I just have him at all – I let my body relax against Roger’s and breathe in his warm, rich, comforting scent, letting it wrap all around me.

“So,” he says after a few long moments of relaxing against each other, “can I just give you the mark now?”

“What!” I shriek, going tense in surprise.

“I mean, if we’re not going to do it publicly- why wait -”

I pull back from Roger, staring up at him, trying to ascertain whether or not he’s serious

But the moment I see the big wicked grin on his face I scowl and smack him on the chest, knowing that he’s teasing me. “No, Roger,” I growl. “I still want it to be right! I’m not going to just let you bite my neck when we’re hanging out in the kitchen and I still have noodle -breath!”

“I like noodles,” he murmurs, stepping close and lifting a hand to slide his fingers under my shirt to the place where my neck meets my shoulder, where he intends to mark me. “And you smell amazing right now – ”

I laugh, shoving him away. “I smell like dirt and field hospital,” I reply, shaking my head and stepping away. “You’re just listening to your wolf too much-”

“Well he won’t shut up Roger groans, tilting his head back even as he laughs. “Seriously,

Cora, it's bite her now, do it! On a constant refrain, whenever you're around!"

My own wolf perks up inside of me, raising her snout smugly to the sky and giving a little howl of triumph. I want it too, she says, giving a wolfish little grin, but I know how to contain myself.

"Well, my wolf," I say smugly, crossing my arms over my chest, "says your wolf is being an impatient brat."

"Yes," Roger growls, grabbing me by the waist again and pulling me close, obviously. Like man, like wolf. This is implied."

"Well," I reply, laughing and smiling up at my handsome mate, my eyes sparkling. "Your wolf had better take some lessons from mine. Because he still has some waiting to do."

"I'd like to meet this wolf of yours," Roger murmurs, kissing me swiftly and then nudging me with his nose. "She sounds judgmental. And cruel. Like someone else I know."

"Excuse you," I growl, giving him a little shove on his chest that doesn't move him at all. "She is beautiful and refined and self-contained."

"Well, I want to see this for myself," he says, giving a happy sigh. "Do you want to show me?"

"How?" I ask, suddenly eager. Because if there is a way – then yes, I absolutely want to do that. I mean, I know that Roger can sense my wolf- but to really see her, to meet her, this part of me that I have to keep inside because I'm half human? What does he have in mind?

"I've been thinking," he says, cocking his head to the side, "about this little thing they call the dream state. Did Ella ever tell you about it?"

"Yes," she says, my eyes going wide." Yes, she did!"

Unfortunately, we don't get to the dream state for a long time because we're too excited about it to actually sleep. So we go through our evening routine as best we can, with both of us showering, and then relaxing quietly in the bedroom, and then laying in bed reading boring books until we're drowsy enough to actually drift off.

I glance over at Roger pretty much every two minutes or so to see how he's doing, and then suddenly between one glance and the next – I see that he's breathing deeply, with his eyes shut and his mouth slightly open.

Eager, but feeling my body getting ready to shut down, I put my book away and switch

off the light, leaning close to Roger to press a kiss to his cheek before I put my head on my pillow. Then, after reaching out to place a hand on his slowly-rising chest, I close my own eyes.

As instructed, I keep myself focused on the goal: to open my mind enough to allow Roger to come in, to send him a little invitation down my mating bond.

And as I feel myself begin to drift off, I do my very best. Come with me, Roger, I say internally, in half of my own voice, half my wolf's. Meet me there.

Chapter 407 – At the Beach

Cora

When I blink my eyes open, I gasp a little at the gorgeous sight before me. Ocean stretches as far as the eye can see in front of me and there, at the horizon, just the tiniest sliver of a sun can be seen, finally taking its own rest below the horizon.

I look to my left and right and chills stumble down my spine at the beautiful beach that stretches out in each direction – perfect white sand against which the surf lightly crashes, lined with palm trees and scrubby forest with no human buildings in sight.

All of this beautiful, untouched nature makes the super plush beach day bed that I'm sitting on even more incongruous, though, and I laugh a little as I look down at it. But my laughter fades as I admire my flowing white dress, and the crisp white sheets, and the amazing warm breeze that brushes against my skin. The bed has four posts from which gauzy fabric flies, and candles are scattered around all of it.

It's so incredibly beautiful that I lose my breath. And I lose it again when I see the handsome man walking across the beach towards me.

"Hey, gorgeous," he says, grinning at me with his hands in his pockets. "Looks like it worked."

Laughing in wonder now, I shake my head at my mate. "I thought – I thought it was supposed to be a forest!"

Roger shrugs, looking around at the beautiful landscape, the evening breeze lifting his hair. "That's Ella's dream state. I guess this is yours." Then he turns to me, the corner of his mouth lifted into a little smile. "Thanks for letting me in."

"Come sit!" I say, scooting over to make room. My mate obliges me, seating himself on the bed. I look him over, laughing. "Why are you dressed in linen pants?" I ask, wrinkling my nose.

"You dressed me like this!" he protests, waving a hand at himself. "I have no control!"

"I did not," I laugh, shaking my head. "You look like you're going to Margaritaville to listen to some Jimmy Buffet."

Roger glares at me a little and then closes his eyes, concentrating. Between one blink and the next, his clothing changes so that he's now in a more familiar black pants and white button-down shirt, though it's not as crisp as something he might wear with a suit. Definitely more beach casual.

“Oh,” he murmurs, looking down at himself. “I guess it was me.”

“We could have just taken it off,” I say with a shrug, scooting closer and reaching out to touch him, to run my hand over his shoulder and his arm. To my surprise, he feels completely corporeal exactly as he does in the real world. “Can you feel that?” I ask.

“I can,” he confirms, a little pleasant shudder passing through his body. Then he takes my chin in one hand and leans in to kiss me, just a soft touch of his lips on mine. “Can you feel that?”

“Mmhmm,” I say, leaning back and grinning widely.

“This is so cool.” Roger says, flopping back onto the bed and staring up into the sky with a wide smile on his face. “Now we can hang out all the time – all day and all night.”

“Nah,” I say, leaning back as well and putting my head on his shoulder. “Sometimes I will lock you in dream jail when you piss me off. And then I will come here, and have dream margaritas all by myself.”

“Cruel,” he growls, snapping his teeth at me and making me laugh. “Just as I said.”

“Oh yeah!” I say eagerly, sitting up suddenly and looking all around as I remember where all of this started. “Where’s my wolf?!”

“I don’t know,” Roger says, sitting up next to me and likewise looking around.

“Why don’t you know?” I ask, turning to him, confused. “Haven’t you done this before?”

“No, Cora,” he says, rolling his eyes at me playfully. “You’re my first mate which is kind of required for the exercise. I have never done this before either. Everything I know about this comes second-hand from Dominic.”

“Oh!” I say, and then I start to laugh. He sits up and laughs with me, even though he doesn’t know what’s funny.

“What,” he murmurs, taking my face in his hands like he can’t resist and kissing me again between words, “what’s so funny?”

“It’s just so cute,” I whisper, still giggling. “Usually I feel like the naïve one with all of this wolf and shifter stuff! But finally we’re on the same playing field! I get to pop your dream cherry!”

Roger laughs along with me, nodding and kissing me and pulling me backwards on the bed with him. ”

Anytime you want, Cora," he murmurs against my mouth as his breathing starts to get heavier. "You're the boss in your own dream – I'm ready when you are."

"Really," I murmur, rolling him backwards a bit so that I can straddle his hips, placing a knee on either side of him and laying my stomach flat against his. And then I run my hands through his hair, bringing my mouth back to his. "Anytime I want?"

But before he can answer me, simultaneously, Roger and I both gasp, our eyes going wide. "Oh my god," I say, freezing on top of my mate, staring into his face.

"Did you," he whispers, not even daring to blink, "did you feel that too?"

And I sit up in a flash, my hands flying to my stomach as I look down at it. Because that that was from the baby-

And then, quite suddenly and totally without warning-

It comes again.

A single, steady pulse of...happy.

"Oh...oh my god," I murmur, tears suddenly springing to my eyes. "Seriously, Cora," Roger says, his voice shaking, and I turn my eyes to his face as he works to prop himself up on his elbows, "am I imagining this?"

"No," I say, shaking my head vehemently and laughing a little desperate laugh, "I mean unless we're both imagining the same thing. Do you do you think it's the dream?"

"Or," he says, reaching out to touch a tentative hand to my stomach, "is our son actually..."

"...happy," I finish for him.

But we get our answer the moment Roger's palm presses flat against my stomach, because it comes again.

Happy...happy...

And then I really do burst into tears, burying my face in my hands. Roger sits up, wrapping his arms around me, and I feel his shoulders shaking a little with his own tears.

Because our little boy – he's finally big enough, now, to not just be a little bundle of cells in my body – but instead a little person in there, feeling his own very real little feelings,

big enough finally to start to pass them to us through the bond –

And we've finally got the first one. And it absolutely shatters my heart into pieces to know that the first thing he's telling us is that he's happy.

"Oh my god," Roger says, still crying as he takes my face in his hands and starts to kiss me again, passing his own feelings along the bond to me, and along to the baby through their own bond, which is attached to mine. Roger sends the baby joy, and happiness, and pride, and love –

And I send it all too –

But then I worry that we're overwhelming the baby, so I stop –

"Don't stop," Roger says, his lips still against mine, "let him feel it."

So I don't I pass my baby all the love 1 in my heart, and my excitement to meet him, and what a treasure he is to me already –

And the baby starts to pass it all back to us faster now –

Happy, happy, happy.

And Roger and I cry harder, laughing with each other, holding each other tight.

Chapter 408 – Just the Faintest Touch

Cora

After a few minutes of this – or maybe an hour, I honestly don't know how time works here – the baby's happiness fades away and then into silence. But not in a bad way – more like he just...

"He fell asleep," Roger murmurs, laughing a little and falling back on the bed, taking me with him since his arms are still wrapped around me.

"It's too early for the baby to sleep..." I murmur, confused. "That happens around like, the seventh month -"

"All right, Dr. Cora," Roger mutters, and I can hear him rolling his eyes, even though I can't see it, which makes me laugh. "Considering that we're hanging out on a magical dream beach, passing our emotions down a magical bond with our unborn child, I don't really think that your medical knowledge is coming into play here -"

"Oh shut up," I murmur, slapping his chest and sighing with contentment. Roger laughs and takes a deep breath of my scent.

"That was amazing," he whispers. "I'll never forget that as long as I live."

"Do you think we just felt it because we're here?" I ask, still likewise thrilled. "Or, will we feel it when we're awake too?"

"I don't know," Roger replies. "But maybe something about being in the dream amplified it. I guess we'll find out."

"Yeah," I say, happy, content. Because as much as I want to feel it all the time, I am also content to wait, to experience all parts of this pregnancy in their own time. "I guess we will."

And I close my eyes and relax against my mate, little shivers passing through me as he traces his fingers idly over the skin of my back, both of us still marveling in the magic of that incredible first connection with the baby.

But suddenly, something changes. And I open my eyes to see my wolf standing there on the beach, just a short distance away.

"Roger," I say softly, starting to sit up. He opens his eyes and looks where I'm looking, likewise catching sight of my wolf in the sand, staring at us, her tongue hanging happily from her mouth.

“Oh,” he says, likewise sitting up and holding me close against him. “Wow, Cora...she’s beautiful.”

But I don’t reply as I look at my wolf, at all of the thousand shades of brown that run through her fur, from tawny to chestnut. Because I know that she’s not here to be admired – though she’s enjoying that too.

Come with me, she says – and I know, instinctually, that Roger hears her as well. I have something to show you.

We both eagerly get to our feet as we look at each other, laughing. Because neither of us feel an ounce of fear, even though this is completely bizarre. When we’re standing, my wolf dances in an eager circle and then trots away from us along the beach.

Roger takes my hand and we follow, walking quickly, both dying to see what she’s leading us towards.

Before we get far, another shadow detaches itself from the forest and comes bounding towards us. Roger laughs as his wolf dashes over to us and eagerly presses his head to Roger’s chest, nuzzling against him.

“This is so cool,” Roger murmurs, shooting me a grin before his wolf comes to press his snout into my own hands.

Hello, Roger’s gigantic wolf says as I marvel at his size, at the way he nearly comes up to my shoulder and can completely encircle me when he winds himself around my body, as he does now. You are mine. You should let him bite you!

I laugh, cooing to the wolf “soon, soon,” and running my hands through his warm fur. Roger laughs as well and puts his arm around my shoulder when his wolf dashes off towards mine.

“Told you he was annoying,” Roger murmurs.

“He’s perfect,” I reply, sighing and turning my face up to his for a kiss. But before our lips can meet, my wolf gives another little yip, calling us forward. Confused, but pleased, Roger and I start out again.

“I have no idea what is happening,” Roger says, grinning.

“I think it’s gonna be good,” I say, peering after my wolf. “She’s really excited.”

We both quicken our steps when my wolf stops beside a little patch of green bushes and again turns in her eager circle. Her prancing gets even more eager as we get closer.

Come come, she says, her tongue lolling as Roger's wolf stands proudly at her shoulder. We want to show him to you.

And then a moan tumbles from my mouth as I fall to my knees in front of the little bundle of fur sleeping there on the beach in front of me, nestled lovingly into a little soft bed of leaves. Roger almost collapses next to me, his hands hitting the sand hard – I think saving him from falling flat on his face in shock.

“Oh,” I say, my voice trembling and my entire body shaking as I reach out towards the incredibly perfect, incredibly tiny little wolf pup sleeping in front of us. “Oh, you...”

And as I reach my fingers out, I barely, just barely feel the brush of fur against them – though not completely, as if he's still half out of the dream – or more than half –

You can't touch him yet, my wolf says, her voice full of love and pride. He is not big enough. But soon.

Roger moans wordlessly as he reaches out too, to try to touch the tiny infant pup, and I feel his own shock and disappointment and joy and wonder as he, too, just barely feels the ghost of fur against his fingertips.

Because even if we haven't met our baby yet this...this is his wolf, his soul. And he's so, so beautiful...

Tears are slipping down my cheeks again as I lay down next to the pup, as I study every inch of him, and feel Roger curling up next to me to do the same.

“He looks like you,” I say through my tears.

“How can he look like me,” Roger says, his own voice hitching with emotion, “he's a...a wolf...”

“His wolf looks like your wolf, you idiot,” I murmur, laughing and reaching out a single finger again to trace the line of my son's wolf's snout, which I can barely feel. His little nose is still pink with his youth, not even turning black like it will when he's older and his little ears are now just 1 triangles pinned flat against his skull –

But all over he's fuzzy, and he's warm, and his little ribs are rising with his breath, and his little tiny paws are the cutest things I've ever seen –

He is a good pup, I hear Roger's wolf tell us, proud. I like him.

We both laugh at that – at the simple, flat way Roger's wolf states things – and I glance

over my shoulder to see my own wolf prancing and pressing herself close to Roger's wolf, raising her snout to tap her nose against his, agreeing with the sentiment.

"I like him too," I say, resting my head down so that my nose is inches from the baby's.

"Yeah," Roger says, curling up behind me and peering over at me so that he, too, can stare at the pup as much as he wants. "We'll keep this one, for sure."

I laugh at my mate at his weird, dry sense of humor that always keeps me guessing and then, to my grief, the world slowly starts to fade as the dream brings itself to an end.

"Oh no," I cry, suddenly frantic, wanting to stay here forever – for days, for weeks if we can to watch him grow maybe see him open his eyes –

"It's all right," Roger murmurs in my ear, pressing a kiss to my cheek. "We'll be back."

"That's right, little baby," I say, turning back to my son, who sleeps peacefully on. "We'll be back. We'll see you here soon."

"We love you so much," Roger murmurs.

And then his voice fades, and the vision fades, and all that is left is rest.

Chapter 409 – Assembling the Team

Cora

When I wake up the next morning the dawn sun is already streaming through the windows, and I am absolutely – hands down – the happiest I've ever been. I'm curled up against my mate's side, my hand still on his chest where I placed it when I fell asleep, and when I look up into his face? I see him already smiling down at me.

My mouth bursts into a smile.

"Well," he says, turning fully towards me now and nudging my nose with his. "That was an incredible dream, wasn't it?"

"Do you think it was real?" I whisper, desperately, desperately hoping that it was.

"I do," he replies, nodding. "I don't think...well, the things that you made up the beach, the landscape...they were all pretty static, no?"

I gasp a little, offended – "It was not static! It was intricate and there was a breeze I could smell the salt -"

"No, Cora," he says, laughing, "I mean like, unchanging. The things that changed – you, me, the feeling the baby passed to us, and the wolves? Those all seemed very real."

"Yeah," I say, relaxing again and snuggling close, tucking my head beneath Roger's chin. "I think it was real too."

"He's a really cute pup," Roger murmurs, sleepily kissing my hair. "Way cuter than Rafe."

"I know, right?" I mumble, yawning. But we don't have to tell Ella and Dominic that."

"No way," he replies. "No need to hurt their feelings. They'll find out soon enough. We're quiet for a moment before I ask my next question. "Did that go...how you thought it would?" I ask, hesitant.

"No," Roger says instantly, laughing. "Honestly, Cora, I thought we were going to have way more sex -"

And then I burst into laughter too, because that's what I had expected as well. I don't know what Sinclair told his brother, but from everything Ella has said? It sounds like the dream state has been a place for them to really explore their relationship in a very physical way – after all, they had sex there first, before they ever did with their real bodies.

And while I can certainly see Roger and I using the dream state for that kind of exploration in the future? A part of me is really, really glad that mine and Roger's experience brought us closer in a different way.

Because right now, I feel so much more like a family than I did before we went to sleep. And it's not that we weren't a family before – but now that we've...we've felt him? Met him, just a little bit?

The baby is so real to me now, so vividly himself, already, that I can't help but think of him as my son, and me as his mom, and Roger as his dad, and us – all of us – as a very real family.

"I know," Roger says, placing a finger under my chin and turning my face up to his. "I feel exactly the same way."

I laugh then, curious. "Wait, how do you know what I'm feeling?"

"You're passing it down the bond," he murmurs. "Are you not trying to?"

"Not intentionally," I say. "But...I was thinking about you. And the baby. So maybe it just...went." He nods, agreeing, understanding.

Then, curious, I reach out and take Roger's hand, giving it a little squeeze and passing a curious little pulse down our mating bond to him, seeing if I can do it intentionally. I'm still not used to this wolf stuff, and I don't know how good I am at it. "Did you feel that?" I ask.

"I did," he murmurs, pleased. "You're curious."

"Yes," I reply, smiling happily. And then I close my eyes and concentrate, still keeping one touch on the bond between me and Roger but also giving a little tap on the bond that I now feel so much more powerfully between me and the baby than I did yesterday. I give it just a little nudge.

And to my shocked pleasure, the baby responds, nudging us back.

My eyes flash open and before I can even ask, I see on Roger's thrilled face that he felt it too.

And then I laugh, and look down at myself, and send another little nudge, this time with a question attached.

...Happy? I ask.

It takes a moment, but then the reply comes and I feel it ring through me like a bell. Happy! My boy sends back, and I laugh, and feel myself start to cry again. Happy, happy.

And then he curls away again, content.

“He’s happy,” Roger says, choked up, taking my face in his hands and kissing me again. “And I don’t think I’ve ever once been happier, not in my whole life.”

“Same,” I reply, laughing at how stupid it sounds, to say it so simply like that. “Roger, I feel exactly the same.”

Ella

When the car turns into Cora’s driveway, she’s already standing outside her door with a to-go mug of tea in her hands, a big smile on her face. Rafe gives a little squeal of anticipation when the car stops and Cora starts to walk towards it.

I look down at my baby, strapped into his car seat, in surprise. “Can you tell when your auntie is near?” I ask, curious. But, obviously, he doesn’t reply.

“Well, you’re very bright and chipper today,” I say when Cora opens the door and peers into the car, blinking a bit in surprise at the two extra men in the row of seats behind me, and then at the guard sitting beside Conner in the passenger seat.

“I am indeed,” Cora says, climbing into her seat and closing her door behind her. “Um, what’s all this?” she asks, a little hesitant before murmuring a hello to Rafe and leaning down to kiss him on the head.

“Sinclair wanted us to have extra guards,” I say, giving a chagrined little shrug. “Do you mind? I told him he could.”

“Yeah,” she says, after smiling around at everyone and saying her hellos as Conner pulls away from the house. “Actually,” she continues, “Roger had the same idea. Did they coordinate this morning?”

“Probably,” I say, rolling my eyes and making my sister laugh. I shake my head, thinking that our two wolf mates sometimes really do have the same mind, even if they’re such different people.

“So!” I continue, leaning forward and grinning at Cora. “Why are you so happy this morning?”

“I’ll tell you later,” she says, waving a hand at me while she glances around at the four

men in the car.

Sensing that Cora wants to keep her reason for her happiness private, my grin deepens. "Oh!" I say, leaning forward, "so you and Roger were..."

And then I lean forward, trying to scent her over Rafe, to see if I can prove my suspicions correct –

"Ew, Ella!" Cora gasps, leaning forward to smack me in the arm. "Stop doing that it's none of your business!" And then she blushes terribly as I burst into laughter. Cora glances around at all of the men who are pretending, quite studiously, that they can't hear us at all.

But I just laugh and turns away from my sister to look out the window. "Fine, fine," I say. "But I'll get all your secrets out of you soon enough."

It's a cheerful ride to the Human Camp – Cora is clearly riding high, and I am feeling good myself. But things start to change as we approach and we're able to see a little bit of what we're going to be working with through the fence before us.

"Oh geeze," Cora says, leaning forward to peer through the chain-link. "This looks...Ella, this looks worse than what Isabel showed us yesterday."

"She said I would be," I reply, grimacing as well. But even a glance tells me that Cora is right – that Isabel may have been underselling the difference between these two refugee camps.

When we pull into the spot and begin to climb out of the car, Conner and the guard in front – Anthony, who was likewise with us at the bunker 1 step out first, looking around to ensure that all is well. When Rafe is safely strapped to my chest, Cora and I step out next, the extra two guards following. A big smile breaks out onto my face as I see Dr. Hank standing awkwardly at the entrance to the camp, Isabel at his side.

"Hank!" I call, waving to him as I hurry over, Cora following slowly behind. I turn to see a little frown on her face, but I ignore it as I give Hank a hug and smile at Isabel. "So, you two have already met?"

"Yessss," she says, turning to raise an eyebrow at me. "Though I wish you'd have told me he was coming."

"I was asked to come," Hank insists, frowning at Isabel in turn.

"I didn't say you weren't," Isabel says, looking at him coolly. I hesitate now, looking between them. What was...what's wrong?

“May I have a word, Ella?” Hank asks, nodding over his shoulder to an empty space behind him where we can speak alone.

“Sure,” I say, stepping aside with him. But he sighs when Conner and another guard step forward as well.

“It’s all right,” I say, putting up a hand to stop them. Both hesitate, but they let me go when Hank and I step a few feet away. Hank has, after all, been cleared as a trustworthy person and certainly not a threat. “What’s – what’s wrong, Hank?”

“You’re underestimating this, Ella,” he says, frowning at me and glancing over at Cora, Isabel, and all of the other men. “Going in like this? It’s never going to work.”

Chapter 410 – Inside the Camp

“You, the future Queen,” Hank says, shaking his head at me, “asked me to be here, and already your friend Isabel is sniffing around me like I’m some kind of convict? Just because I’m a human?”

“What?” I ask, confused, glancing over at her. “Isabel Isabel is on our side in this, Hank – she wants to help humans too -”

“It’s not about what she wants, or she thinks she wants,” Hank says, shaking his head and catching my gaze, making me listen to him. “It’s about generations of families telling wolves to keep separate from humans, to not tell them their secrets. And then it’s about the very recent shock that humans have experienced, realizing that wolves are real – and having their world absolutely destroyed by that knowledge.”

“So...” I say, frowning, starting to understand. “Do you do you not want to help? Do you want to leave?”

“No” he says, surprised, “No, Ella, I want to help very much. I just think you need to be prepared for the kind of reception you’re going to get if you walk in there with fifteen wolves in tow. Especially if they, like Isabel, have good intentions but still see humans as inherently different at best, or at worst as dangerous, or untrustworthy.”

“Isabel doesn’t think that,” I snap, instantly defensive.

“She certainly didn’t trust me,” Hank says, shrugging, his eyes apologetic.” And again, Ella, you asked me to be here.”

I sigh, murmuring that I’ll talk to her, but then something else he said rings in my head. “Wait, fifteen?” I ask, confused and looking over my shoulder. “Where are you getting fifteen wolves from? We only brought four guards...and Isabel...”

Hank sighs and then nods to the two black cars in the parking lot that I didn’t notice. And then, as I look at them, the doors open and men begin to spill out. I groan, realizing that Sinclair sent more ahead of us.

“Okay,” I sigh, looking back at Hank. “I take your point. How do you think we should do this?”

“I think,” he says carefully, looking over at our group, “you should let me and Cora take the lead. And leave the vast majority of your guys at the gate, telling them to come in only in an emergency.”

“Sinclair will flip if I go in without a guard,” I say, shaking my head.

“Two,” he says, holding up as many fingers for me to see. “One for you, one for Cora. And Ella? Pick nice ones, okay?”

And I sigh, and nod, and we head back to our group.

Twenty minutes later, after a long conversation and a great deal of negotiation, Cora, Isabel, Hank and I head into the camp with three guards behind us – Conner, Anthony, and a new one named Theo who has a radio line to the men waiting outside the gate open at all times. He also has his phone constantly in his hand and sends Roger and Sinclair text updates what feels like every ten minutes.

“You really don’t have to do that,” I say to Theo, resting a hand on his arm and looking up at him. “My mate is just ...overreacting.”

Theo nods to me and then looks down at his phone. “Alpha Sinclair said you’d say that,” he says with a little bit of chagrin. “And...he also said you forgot your phone again, so me being in constant touch with him is the consequence of that.”

“Oh damn it,” I murmur, scowling and pulling my hand away, frustrated. “I did forget my phone, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did, Luna,” Theo says, giving me a little smile as he tucks his own phone into the carrier attached to his belt.

“Fine,” I sigh, turning to Hank and Cora, who are consulting with Isabel.” Okay!” I say. “Let’s get started!”

Unlike last time, Isabel doesn’t give us a tour of the camp. When I ask why, she tells me that while she felt it would bolster the wolves to see me visiting, she worries that it will have the opposite effect on the humans – that they might see us moving through the camp as a kind of predatory prowling.

“We can’t blame them for that,” I sigh as we head directly for the children’s medical tent. “Their world has been so displaced by the secret of shifter existence. Especially these humans.”

“Plus, humans are naturally more wary,” Isabel says passively, “we are predators to their prey, after all.”

“Isabel,” I say, stopping and putting a hand on her arm. “Do you really think that about humans?”

And then Isabel’s mouth falls open a bit and she blushes. “Oh my goodness,” she murmurs, shaking her head. “I...I just heard what I said. Forgive me, Ella,” she

continues, clearly contrite and embarrassed, "I...I grew up in a wolf household. I really do understand humans and wolves to be equal, I just spent my entire life with wolves."

"It's okay," I say, cocking my head to the side. "I'm sure you're not alone in that. And that plenty of humans have a lot of ideas about what wolves are like. But..."

"No," she says, interrupting me and nodding eagerly. "I get it. I need to... spend some time thinking through those preconceived notions." She glances now to where Conner, Cora, and Hank are waiting for us at the entrance to the tent. Both of the doctors arms are crossed in frustration, clearly eager to get to work. "And I think I was...not very nice to your human friend there," she murmurs before looking back at me. "I'm so sorry, Ella. Will you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," I say, smiling at her. "Your heart is in the right place, Isabel. I know you and I know that we can just move forward."

Smiling at me, nodding, Isabel takes my arm and we join Conner, Cora and Hank, the two guards following behind. Without a word, we all pass into the tent and my heart instantly sinks at what I see.

"Oh my god," I murmur, one hand immediately going to my mouth as another presses my baby closer against my chest.

The tent is loud filled to the brim with crying children and only a very small number of adults working their way around the room. I grit my teeth with frustration because these poor people they clearly need so much help, and they certainly have not been getting their fair share of it. As bad as the children's medical tent was at the Wolf Camp?

This one is...five times worse.

"We have to get to work," Cora says, turning angry eyes to me. I nod, agreeing completely as Hank strides away, already seeking action.

"Same old plan?" I murmur, seeking her guidance, and she nods once before striding off herself, Isabel going with her. One of the guards follows her as Conner comes to my side.

"I'm with you, Luna?" he asks.

"You're with me, Conner," I say, and then I nod to Theo as well, who is likewise assigned to my duty. And, with that as our final word, we get started.

The hours pass quickly as we move through the tent. We follow our old methods, with Cora and Hank discerning the worst cases and me attending to those first. The guards

stay to the side as best they can, letting us consult and heal, and throughout the day I see their expressions changing. At first they were hesitant, wary, as the humans with whom we worked gave us glares and clutched the children to them protectively.

But then, as our guards Theo and Anthony see the work we're doing – see the relief we bring to the children, see the change in their parents' faces as they see their children given new life – an ease comes to my guards' expressions and their postures.

After I open my eyes and smile down at a little boy named Benny whose breath had been rasping, but who is now smiling and breathing easily, Theo looks at me in wonder and nods, his head bobbing eagerly. I smile at him, glad that he's truly on the team now, in spirit as well as assignment. Behind him, holding Rafe in his arms, Conner grins and gives me a thumbs-up.

I move to stand up, smiling at both of my guards, but the little boy catches my hand.

"Hey!" he says, grinning up at me.

"Hey," I reply, laughing and sitting back down to smile at him. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," Benny says quickly, obviously eager to move on from that very boring subject. "Hey, are you one of the wolf people?"

"I am," I say, laughing.

"No, you're not," he says, narrowing his eyes at me, still holding my hand.

"Why don't you think so?" I asked, grinning and cocking my head to the side, charmed by his bold, frank nature.

"Because," he replies with a frown, "you are pretty. And so small."

I laugh and wrinkle my nose at him. "Wolves come in all shapes and sizes. My mate is very big. You would believe he was a wolf, if you saw him. But my sister is a human," I say, pointing over at Cora, who is checking a young man's vitals in a bed nearby.

"That's impossible," Benny says, narrowing his eyes at me. "If your sister is a person, you are also a person!"

I laugh and shake my head. "Not in this case," I say, grinning at him. "I promise, I'm a shifter."

"Prove it," the little boy says, smiling fully at me now and revealing a missing front tooth that's so cute it breaks my heart. "Turn into a wolf!"

Chapter 411 – The Writer

“Nah,” I say, leaning in to stroke a hand over Benny’s hair, “I can’t shift right now now. I have to go and help some other kids.”

Still suspicious, the boy takes his hand from mine and crosses his arms over his chest. “Tell me your name. When my mom comes back, I’ll ask her to look you up on the internet. Then we’ll know whether or not you’re a wolf.”

Laughing, I tell him my name, and then I look around the tent. “Where is your mom, anyway?” I ask. “I’d like to meet her.”

The little boy is quiet for a moment and then he shrugs. “She’ll be back any minute.”

“Oh,” I say, and then I feel my heart ache a little bit inside of me, though I do my very best to keep my voice cheerful. “Did she just step away? When’s the last time you saw her?”

“Coupla days,” Benny murmurs, looking down at his blankets for a second. I glance up at Isabel, who has come close and was listening. She grimaces and then nods, confirming my suspicions. This little boy hasn’t seen his mother for a long, long time.

“Okay,” I say, reaching out and stroking a hand over his hair. “I’m going to do some work, okay? But I’ll come back and visit you in a little bit, all right, kiddo?”

“Okay!” he replies, instantly cheerful and smiling up at me. “Will you turn into your wolf then?”

“We’ll see,” I reply, laughing and giving him a wink. Then he waves to me as I stand up and move to Conner to instantly take Rafe into my own arms, hugging my baby close and passing him all of the love I have in my heart down the bond to him.

Because I honestly feel as if I could spend the rest of the day crying if I allow myself to think too hard about Benny, who was just quietly suffocating in his bed while he waited for his mother to come back.

Hank catches my eye and comes closer, glancing at Benny as he does.

“Will he survive?” I murmur, pitching my voice low enough so that the boy can’t hear me.

“After what you just did, Ella?” Hank asks. “Yeah. He’s going to make it. But he needs more than just medical help,” Hank continues. “You know that.”

“I do know that Hank,” I reply, and then I look sharply at Theo. “I need you to text Sinclair,” I say, my voice taking on more of Sinclair’s command than I’ve ever heard it do

before. "Tell him we need to triple everything. Or more, if we can. All of the medical aid that's being sent to these people, and the social workers, and...and everything. All right? Tell him I said immediately."

Theo's eyebrows go up, but he does as I say. My eyes return to Hank, though I'm very surprised to see him smiling at me.

"Well," he says, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Look who's just become a Queen."

I laugh in surprise but then roll my eyes at him. "Not yet," I sigh, straightening my shoulders and starting to look around the room. "When I'm a Queen, you'll know because I'll be wearing my tiara 24/7. It's the only perk of the job."

"Nah," Hank says, putting a warm hand on my back and guiding me towards the next patient. "The perk is being able to do this. And to order your mate to send thousands of dollars of supplies at the drop of a hat."

"Yeah," I say, smiling at Hank as I hand Rafe off to Conner. Then I get back to work, seating myself in the waiting chair next to a little girl with cuts and bruises all over her arms and face. "Hi, sweetheart," I say, giving her a warm smile. "What's your name?"

The rest of the day and early evening passes predictably. Cora and Hank consult with the doctors and nurses already working here to determine the work that I should do, and I heal, and Conner guards Rafe, and Theo and Anthony guard Cora and me.

By the time I can see darkness beyond the edges of the tent, I am pleased with the day's work – we've helped dozens of children, and even brought some back from a very dark place. I look around the room, exhaling a satisfied breath, but I blink when I notice a very real change in the people in the tent.

When I had entered this morning, the people – especially the adults – had shrunk away from my team, and had barely noticed me. I am, after all, the smallest person here and had a baby strapped to my chest. The people had watched our every movement with narrow, suspicious eyes, always waiting for the next shoe to drop – for us to reveal the way in which we were going to hurt them, or take something from them.

But now, after a long day of working to help?

The narrowed suspicion is gone, and now many eyes are wide with wonder, trained on me as I move through the tent. I blush a little and duck my head, tucking my hair behind my ear as I hold a sleeping Rafe tight against me.

"What?" Cora asks, noticing my sudden change in attitude.

"They're all just... looking at me,' murmur, feeling awkward. I Cora looks around and then laughs. What, did you not expect all of the hero worship and awe when you decided to come and use your demigoddess powers on a bunch of unsuspecting mortals?"

"Demigoddess powers," I say, scoffing a little. "Don't be ridiculous, Cora – "

"Well, that's what they are, Ella," she says, laughing at me again. "I mean, do you need me to start making it rain to prove my point?"

"I'd prefer it if you didn't," I say loftily, laughing a little. "But still," I say, dropping my voice and stepping closer to her. "I mean...I'm just a girl. I'm just helping the best way I can, like anyone else would do -"

"Not anymore you're not, Ells," Cora says, patting my cheek with a sigh. " You're a part-goddess wolf Queen."

"Yeah," I sigh, twisting my lips, but then I glare at her a little. "Well, you're a weird hybrid soon-to-be wolf mom who is probably like, a duchess or something, once Sinclair gets all the titles figured out."

"And a doctor," Cora says, giving me a wink and moving forward on to the next case. "Don't forget that!"

"I won't!" I sigh, following after her. " Because you sure as hell won't let me!"

We're both still laughing as I give Rafe – cuddled in Conner's arms a little kiss on the cheek and then sit down in the chair waiting by the bed of my next patient – the one I've been told is the last one of the day.

"Hi," I say brightly, looking at the little girl – probably about eight years old and then up at the woman who is 1 probably her mother, though she looks a bit young for it. Still, by the affinity between them – both with long, dark brown hair and pale skin – I know that they're family. "My name is Ella. I've heard you're not feeling well."

"No," the little girl murmurs, moving her hands to her stomach and frowning. "I am sick."

I glance up at Cora, who nods to me. They've briefed me, of course – the girl isn't just sick, she's got some kind of bacterial infection that's increased to the point where it's threatening the health of her inner organs. Still, I like to check in with my patients before I get started, to make a connection with them.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I say, offering my hand and hoping that she'll place hers in it. The girl hesitates, but I just leave my open palm there in case she changes her mind. " I'm going to try to make you feel better, if you'll let me. Will that be all right?"

The girl glances at the woman with her, who nods, though I note that she's staring at me quite intensely. The girl looks back to me and likewise nods.

"What's your name?" I ask, smiling at her.

"Jessica," she replies, just a whisper.

"Jessica," I repeat, my smile broadening. "Well, let's see what we can do. Just relax." And then I take a deep breath, and close my eyes, and fall into my meditative state.

It's a trickier case than a clear-and-cut wound, since the bacteria has spread throughout her gastrointestinal system. But after the gift has done its work sweeping through her and fixing all the things that it felt were wrong, it returns to me and I open my eyes. About twenty minutes have passed.

I smile at Jessica, my eyes traveling over her face, which already looks better less wan, less pained and worried.

"How are you feeling?" I ask quietly, and to my pleasure she puts her hands in mine now. "Much better. And..." she hesitates, looking at the woman next to her, "hungry. Can I have something to eat?"

"Of course you can," I say, grinning and looking up at Cora, who gives me a thumbs up and turns away to ask one of the passing nurses about some food. "Is there anything else you want?" I ask, curious.

Jessica shakes her head no, smiling at me, but the woman next to her clears her throat. Curious, I turn my gaze to her.

"Thank you, Luna," she says, surprising me a little by using a wolf's title, which none of the other humans have done. "Thank you so much for helping my sister," she says, her voice choked. I reach to her with my other hand, smiling at her as the tears drip down her cheeks.

"Of course," I say, squeezing her hand when she gives it to me. "I'm just glad that I was able to help. What's your name?" I ask.

"I'm Sarah," she says quietly, giving me a shy little smile. "But actually, Luna, we've... we're already connected, in a strange way. I – I know all about you. I've been hearing about you my whole life.'

"Really?" I ask, my eyes going wide with surprise.

“Yes,” she says, laughing a little and nodding eagerly. “And actually, um,” she hesitates now, glancing around before leaning close to whisper. “A few weeks ago, I actually... left a letter on your doorstep.”

My eyes fly wide open in my shock and I suddenly clutch the woman’s hand tight in mine, knowing suddenly precisely who she is.

Or, if not who she is precisely what she did to save my son’s life.

Chapter 412 – A New Guest

Ella

“You,” I breathe, staring at Sarah in awe as she begins to eagerly nod. But I just shake my head in wonder. “You were the one who warned us – who left us the note that told us that -“.

And my eyes instantly snap to Conner, standing a few feet away and watching us warily, Rafe sleeping in his arms.

Sarah’s eyes follow mine. “Is that him?” she whispers. “The little baby?”

“Is that the prince?” Jessica asks, sitting up eagerly in her bed. “Oh – I’ve heard so much about him-”

But I’m instantly on my feet, moving to Conner to take my child and turning my head to Theo as Conner transfers Rafe to my arms. “Call Sinclair – tell him we’re bringing someone home -two people. Prepare...whatever gets prepared. I don’t know. And – and record this ” I say, pointing to Jessica and Sarah. “I want him to see it. All of it.”

“Luna,” Theo says, frowning, “I can’t do both at once-”

“Figure it out!” I call over my shoulder, quickly moving around the bed to Sarah’s side, bringing the baby close so she and Jessica can see them.

“Yes,” I say, tears filling my eyes as I sit on the bed with Jessica on my left and Sarah, still in her bedside chair, on my right. I lean forward so they can both see Rafe sleeping between them.”

This is Rafe – this is the baby, the prince. And you saved him,” I say, shaking my head and staring between them. My voice shakes with the intensity of it – with how much I want them to know the impact they had, how grateful I am for their early warning

Because if if we hadn’t gotten that note –

If we hadn’t known –

Those men who came through my window it would have been a complete shock, and I never, ever would have been able to react in time. And Sinclair wouldn’t have been as wary may not even have been home –

And my baby would be gone – in Xander’s hands-

“I owe you everything,” I whisper to Sarah, the tears starting to streak down my cheeks

now.

“It was my pleasure, Luna,” Sarah says, crying now too as she smiles at me, clearly so, so happy to have helped to be able to finally meet me, and Rafe, and see the results of what must have been so dangerous for her to accomplish.

“He’s so big,” Jessica says, her eyes wide as she looks down at Rafe. Her words make me laugh and I look back down at my sleeping baby. “Yeah, he’s my little meatball,” I say, “you should see his dad.”

“He’s beautiful, Luna,” Sarah says, hesitating as she reaches out a single finger towards him. But I hold the baby forward a little, letting her brush his cheek. As she touches him, a huge smile comes to her face. “So lovely, the little prince.”

“What’s what’s going on here?” Cora asks, suddenly standing behind Sarah, her eyes wide with surprise and worry. She had only stepped away for a few minutes, and suddenly everything has changed.

“This is Sarah,” I say, smiling up at my sister and wiping at the tears on my cheeks. “She...well, she wrote the note.”

“The note?” Cora asks, her face twisting in confusion.

“Yeah,” I reply, nodding. “The one.... on the doorstep, the day after the christening. That told us...”

“Oh,” Cora says, and then she gasps as she figures out the true significance of this. “Oh my – oh my god.” Then she crouches down at Sarah’s side, looking up at her. “Are you serious?”

Sarah laughs and shrugs a little, clearly shy and not knowing how to respond. “Yes,” she says.

Cora turns to stare at me. “We have to bring them back!”

“I know,” I say, nodding eagerly. But then, seeing Sarah shrink away from us a little at Cora’s words, I reach out a hand to her, smiling at this new pair of sisters. “Would you like to come to the palace with us? As my guests? We can make you very comfortable there, and we want to thank you -”

Cora turns her head sharply at me, narrowing her eyes a little and letting me know- without words that she expects me to tell them the whole truth.

“And, well,” I say, sighing a bit as I look Sarah in the eye. “My mate will want to meet you

too, and hear the story. And he will have questions.”

“Oh,” Sarah says, looking at Jessica, clearly worried.

“But I promise,” I say, reaching out a hand that I place gently on her knee. I withdraw it immediately when I see Sarah flinch. Still, I persist, leaning forward. “I promise, Sarah – you will not be harmed, and we – we will do everything we can to help you. We just we’d love to know more about you, and that day, and your life...would that be all right?”

Sarah hesitates again, looking between Cora and I.

“You can say no,” I say softly. “Though I very much hope you will trust me and say yes. I...I owe you everything, Sarah.”

And then, with her eyes firmly on Rafe, Sarah nods once. Cora stands up immediately, moving forward to the guards, letting them know to prepare. But I stay with Sarah and Jessica, talking softly with them for the next few hurried minutes while I can hear my team behind me, working in a bit of a flurry.

Then, when Theo taps me on the shoulder, I finally turn around. “We’re ready, Luna,” he says, his face again serious. “If you are?”

“I think so,” I say, turning to Sarah and Jessica. “Shall we?”

And the two of them stand up and walk with me out of the tent, and out of the camp, and towards the cars that will take us all to the palace.

About thirty very tense minutes later, our convoy of cars pulls up to the back entrance of the palace and travels into the underground garage that we left from this morning. Cora sits tensely beside me as I look persistently out the back of the car, towards the car behind me in which Sarah and Jessica are riding.

I was very, very unhappy when Theo told me in no uncertain terms – that Cora and I would be riding separately from the refugees. I had fought him on it, but he was stalwart, holding out the phone to me with the direct order from Sinclair written clearly in a text message.

But, since no one would get into the cars until I agreed to the order, Sarah eventually gave me a soft touch on the elbow and told me that it was all right. Only then did I relent, though I’m still not happy about it.

“Hank texted,” Cora murmurs as we pull slowly towards our parking space.

“You still text Hank?” I ask, my eyes going wide as I look towards my sister for the first

time this ride.

“He didn’t text me,” she says, rolling her eyes. “He knows Roger would kill him. But he texted you, through me, because he says you’re not answering your phone.”

“Clever Hank,” I murmur, leaning forward over Rafe’s carrier. “What did he say?”

“He said to tell you he thinks you’re doing right by Sarah and Jessica,” she says, her voice warm, “and that he’ll meet us there again tomorrow, if we can.”

“Okay,” I say, starting to unbuckle Rafe immediately when we stop. “Text him back that I said thanks, and yes, we’ll text him in the morning to let him know our plans.”

“So stiff,” Cora says, looking up at me and raising her eyebrows. “Where has my sweet sister gone? Don’t you at least want me to include some kind of rainbow or star emojis to lighten that up a bit?”

I pause before I lift my son out of his car seat so that I can glare at my sister. “This is serious, Cora,” I snap.

“Sorry, sorry,” she sighs, turning to get out of the car.

I’m not actually mad at her, obviously, but I don’t have time to tell her so. As soon as I get out of the car I head to Sarah’s side. “Okay,” I say, smiling at the sisters. “Please come inside – we’re going to get you settled in a room, and have dinner sent to you. Does that – does that sound all right?”

“That sounds fine,” Sarah says, raising her hands to play anxiously with her hair as Jessica presses close to her side, her arms wrapped around Sarah’s hips.

“Okay,” I say, giving them both a warm smile before I see movement at the door that leads into the palace – and then a very familiar, too-tall, too- broad silhouette come through the door. “You two stay right here for a second, okay?” I say, and Sarah nods before I dash away to Sinclair.

“Ella – “He says immediately, his voice worried as he looks beyond me.

“Look at me, Dominic,” I demand and he instantly does as I say, his eyes wide with surprise.

“What is it?” he asks.

“What do you have planned for them?” I ask, bouncing Rafe in my arms, because he’s starting to cry a little- probably picking up on some of my anxiety and a little of the anger

that's starting to curl in me as I anticipate what my mate is going to say.

Because I know – I just know that his Alpha instinct is to treat this woman like a prisoner of war, and not like the savior she is.

And damn it, but there's no way in hell I'm going to let him do that.

Chapter 413 – Biding Time

Ella

Sinclair blinks at me in surprised confusion and then sighs as he speaks honestly.
“We’ve prepped an interrogation cell -”

“No,” I snap, pointing a finger up into his face that he immediately swats away. “No,” I continue to insist, taking a step closer and frowning furiously up at him. Rafe, in my arms, starts to cry harder. “Those two have been through hell, and they saved Rafe’s life -”

“We have no idea who they are, Ella,” Sinclair growls down at me, “they could be anyone -”

“They are not.” I snap, interrupting him and making him groan and tilt his head back in frustration. “They are refugees – two people who lost everything, if they ever had anything to begin with. I understand that we need to hear their story, Dominic, but we owe them everything. We owe our child’s life to that woman over there,” I continue, pointing behind me to where I know Sarah still stands.

“So, what would you have me do,” Sinclair says, forcing himself to be patient as he lifts his head again and looks at me.

“Treat them as our honored guests,” I reply. “Put them in a guest room – guard it if you have to! Bug it so you can listen to every word they say, if you’re that worried! I don’t care! But until we know more, we treat them as the honored guests I know them to be. Feed them, allow them to get clean and warm, let them sleep, and then tomorrow we ask questions. All right?”

Sinclair takes a deep breath, closing his eyes and rubbing them slowly with the thumb and forefinger of one hand. Then, after a moment, he drops his hand and looks at me again. “A guest suite, fully guarded. On a lower level – nowhere near where we sleep. And no one sees them until morning-not even you. All right?”

I nod sharply and he turns away, letting his staff know and coming up with a new plan.

As Sinclair does that, I move back to Sarah and Jessica, who are standing anxiously with Cora. I hurriedly tell them the plan – that we’ll let them take the night to relax and refresh, and then we’ll see them again in the morning. Sarah lets me know that she understands, and that this is fine, and I take her hand again, giving her a squeeze.

“Thank you, I say, smiling at her. ” For everything. And also for your patience – I know that this is...well, that it’s weird,” I say with a shrug.

"It's okay, Luna," she says, giving me a soft smile and running her hand over her sister's hair. "We grew up in the home of a Duke, after all. We know what it's like to have to bend to the needs of a royal household."

And my jaw drops open at the woman's revelation:

That she grew up in the home of my uncle Xander. And she might be the one who has the answers to all of the questions that we have about what he intends to do next.

I open my mouth to ask more when suddenly Theo is at my side.

"If I may, Luna," he says formally, nodding to me and then at the rest of our little group. "We're ready for you."

And I sigh, nodding again to Sarah to let her know that I'm on her side. She nods back, and then, as a group, everyone moves into the palace to figure out our next steps.

Cora and I only caught bare glimpses of our mates in all that came next. Roger nodded to both of us, his face serious, as we passed him in the hall. Cora blew him a kiss and I smirked, a little, as I saw him reach into the air, pretending to snatch it – a gesture that to the Betas to whom he was speaking probably just looked like him stretching.

But it cheers me immensely, in all of my anxiety and sadness for Sarah and Jessica, to see Cora so happy. I bump her with my shoulder as we walk towards mine and Sinclair's personal chambers – as Theo let us know Sinclair asked us to do – and she gives me a little wink, which further encourages me to consider that all is well.

I relax further when we get into the privacy of my rooms. Cora and I don't say much, clearly both lost in our own thoughts a little bit as she hops into the shower and I give Rafe a little bath. Then Cora takes Rafe from me while I take my turn in shower, taking him into the bedroom to see if she can get him to sleep.

When I come out of my closet in a comfortable pair of pajamas, and see Cora likewise cozy in borrowed leggings and a zip-up hoodie, I can't help but laugh.

"What?" she asks, grinning at me as she turns away from Rafe's bassinet.

"I was just so worked up fifteen minutes ago," I say, shaking my head and crossing the room to her, my comfortable slippers barely making a sound on the floor. "I fell immediately into the panic that I felt when we first found out that Rafe was being threatened. And now...well, now that we're in pajamas, waiting for our mates to handle it, I feel...kind of silly."

I peer down at my baby, who is just barely starting to fall asleep, as Cora puts an arm

around my shoulders.

“Nah,” she says, “you did the right thing. Sinclair and Roger didn’t see them in that refugee center – they wouldn’t have realized what delicate people they were working with. Those two needed you to be hard on their side. Like you are for everyone who needs you.”

I sigh as I look up into my sister’s face. “You’re too nice to me,” I say quietly. “Too encouraging.”

“Well, I think there’s a pretty fair chance that Sinclair’s going to yell at you soon,” she says, wrinkling her nose and squeezing my shoulders. “So, I’m just trying to balance it out so that you get a good night’s sleep.”

A housekeeper comes then, bringing us our dinner, and Cora and I carry our trays to the bed where we can keep an eye on Rafe once she leaves. We tuck into our food quietly for a second before I take a deep breath, closing my eyes and forcing myself to relax.

What I really need, frankly – before Sinclair comes in and we have to have a big conversation about what we’re going to do next, and relive all the drama from those horrible days when we first found out that someone was coming for Rafe – is a distraction.

And quite suddenly, I remember how happy Cora was this morning.

“So,” I say, smirking as I open my eyes and peer at her.

“What is this new expression,” she says, leaning back warily as she takes in my smirk. “I don’t like this.”

“I was just wondering,” I say, my smile deepening, “why you were so happy this morning.”

“Oh,” she says, and a huge grin breaks out on her face as well.

“See!” I say, laughing and pointing my fork at her, my eagerness amplified by the fact that I’m using it to step away for a moment from my worries. “I know that something was up! Spill!”

“Welllllll,” Cora says, gathering her thoughts and picking up a little cup of chocolate pudding that’s sitting in the corner of her tray. She takes a little spoonful and lifts it to her mouth before she smiles and meets my eyes. Roger and I did the whole dream state thing last night.”

I shriek a little in excitement and Cora laughs but then smacks me on the knee, nodding to my almost-sleeping baby.

“Oh, he’s used to it,” I say, waving a hand at Rafe – who, indeed, does not budge and leaning eagerly towards my sister. “What was it like? Did you see the forest? Did you guys...do stuff?”

“Actually, no,” she says, laughing and likewise eagerly leaning forward. But as she does, I suddenly lean back. “What!?” I gasp. “You did the dream state and you didn’t get naked!? What even was the point -”

“Ella,” she says, laughing and rolling her eyes. “Would you just listen?”

And I do, reaching for my own cup of pudding and eating it eagerly as I soak in the details of my sister’s beach dream, my eyes getting wider and wider as she goes.

“Oh my god!” I gasp when she tells me about feeling her bond with the baby for the first time – and the first emotion coming through, and it being happiness. My eyes instantly fill with tears for the fifth or sixth time that day.

“Jeeze, Ella,” Cora says, leaning forward and wiping at my cheeks, though she can’t help her smile. “You must be so dehydrated all the time – ”

But I smack her hand away, wiping my own eyes and ignoring her comments. “What happened next?” I ask.

And Cora leans forward, eager to tell me the really good part.

Chapter 414 – Three is Better than Two

Ella

I'm really sobbing by the time that Cora tells me that her wolf led her to Roger's wolf, and then to her pup – just ugly crying my little heart out in absolute happiness for my sister, as well as well, as well as in jealousy. Just a little bit.

"Ella!" Cora says, laughing and reaching out to put her hands on my shoulders. "Oh my god, I wouldn't have told you if I thought you were going to react like this!"

"You'd better tell me!" I gasp between sobs, glaring at her. "You'd better text me every morning after you have a dream with your little pup in it! I want to hear everything! That is so amazing – what did he look like?"

"Well," she says, biting her lip a little. "He's still so small, so it's hard to tell

And I start to cry again, making Cora roll her eyes and smack me on the knee.

"Okay, okay," I say, taking a deep breath and working to steel myself. "I promise. I'll keep it together."

It's a lie, but still – I will try.

"He had a little pink nose," Cora says, grinning as I bite my lip. "And dark fur around his muzzle, just like Roger's wolf has," I press my eyes shut and clasp my hands to my chest. "And he has four little white paws – "

"Okay stop," I say, putting a hand out towards her and turning my face away. "That's so cute – I can't even handle it

She laughs then, and I control myself enough to open my eyes again and look at her, seeing that she's shaking her head at me. "I can't believe that you're reacting like this, Ella," she says, her voice awed. "I mean, you told me that you went running as your wolf in your dream and that Rafe was there, behind you! In little flashes!"

"Yes, but I didn't get to touch him," I say.

"Yes, you did," she says, frowning at me. "When you I couldn't reach Rafe through the bond, you told me that you found him in the forest! A full little baby! And you held him in your arms before he was born!"

"Cora," I say, sighing and tilting my head to the side. "Don't you see how that's different?"

But she just stares at me, clearly not getting it, so I sigh and look down at my hands.

“Rafe was was sick, or something, and we were so worried we were going to lose him. What you and Roger got last night – you got to meet your baby, so young, and so healthy! With only happiness in his heart. All during my pregnancy with Rafe,” I say, glancing over at him, guilt running through me anew, “he went through so many terrible emotions.” I shake my head in my grief, remembering it. “Sinclair felt them more than I did – because he had his connection to Rafe sooner than me – but...”

When I look back at my sister, I see her nodding in understanding, her face fallen a little in pity.

“It’s good,” I say, reaching over our trays to take my sister’s hands and squeeze them. “I’m terribly envious – I’d have given anything to have my bond with Rafe as early as you do yours, and to have had him tell me so early that he feels happy, and to have met him as a little pup!”

I take a deep breath as Cora nods along with me, finally getting it.

“But,” I say, leaning forward and smiling at her. “I’m so glad that you got to have all of that, Cora. That is amazing. I want you to do it every night and then come and tell me all about it every day.”

“Done,” she says with a big happy breath, taking her hands from mine and laying down on the bed, propping her head up with her elbow. And then she studies me for a second before her face splits into a wicked little grin.” You know, Ella,” she says, “you could have it all – a second chance at it.”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Stop breast feeding,” she says, nodding to Rafe. “Get pregnant. You’ll have the chance to do it all meet the little baby in the dream state, have a happy, healthy pregnancy – share it all with Sinclair, like you weren’t able to do with the first one.”

My breath hitches as I look over at Rafe, and then as I stare off into the distance, I...well, I actually let myself contemplate for real just how very much I want that. But still, there are so many reasons to hesitate...

“Not yet,” I say, my voice faint as I stare of and...and consider everything that still weighs on my little family.

“Why not?” Cora breathes, and I jump a little as I feel a tap on my knee. I smile when I look back at my sister, realizing that she kicked me. “Come on, we can be pregnant together. Torture the Sinclair brothers even more than we already do. It’ll be a blast.”

“Because,” I reply, taking a deep breath and sighing. “I...I can't be pregnant again with all this uncertainty hanging over my head. I did it once, and it almost killed me -”

“Literally,” Cora points out, and I shrug, conceding the point.

“I want it, Cora,” I say, definite on that point and suddenly remembering the vision our mother's priests gave me that one time – of a family of four, with two girls and two boys. And the second- oldest child – it had been a little girl, with long rose- just like mine... e- gold hair, and a face

“But not until this is sorted,” she finishes for me, nodding with understanding, I think remembering the vision at the same time I am.

“Not until Rafe is safe,” I agree, and then I grin. “Then! We can get me good and pregnant.”

“Well don't wait too long,” she says, sighing. “I want our first three to be close in age, so they can all take care of each other.’

“Why can't they do that with just two?” I ask, glancing at her stomach, where she's carrying the child I know for sure is going to be Rafe's best friend.

“Because,” she replies, grinning, ” these two boys are going to need a girl to keep things spicy.”

I laugh loudly then, leaning forward to grin at her. “You're right,” I say, agreeing heartily. “Imagine how bored Dominic and Roger would be without us in their lives.”

And then, as if on que, the door opens and our mates come into the room, frowning at us – and certainly not bored. Seeing their faces, Cora and I burst into laughter.

“What is this,” Roger asks, trying to look stern as he comes over to us but failing to keep the smile from his lips. ” I don't trust you two when you're cackling like this.”

“Good choice,” I say, smiling at him and then reaching out a hand to my mate, who surprises me by ignoring my hand and lifting me bodily off the bed, holding me tight against him. “Oh!” I say, genuinely shocked but certainly not displeased.

“Trouble,” Sinclair growls, tucking his head close against me and taking a deep breath of my scent as I savor the feel of his stubble against my cheek. Feeling his worry down the bond, I press myself close to him, sending apology along down it as well. “Living up to your name today,” he murmurs, that's for certain.”

"I'm sorry, Dominic," I whisper to him, truly meaning it. "I – I got freaked out. But I really think it was the right thing to do – bringing them here, making them comfortable."

"You did right," he says, pulling away and nodding to me before pressing a quick kiss to my mouth and sitting down on the bed with me still in his arms. "It was just a big surprise, is all."

"For us too," I say, looking to Cora for confirmation. She raises her eyebrows and nods in agreement as Roger clears the trays from the bed and sits down next to his mate.

"How are they?" I ask, eager. "Did you find anything else out?"

"They're very comfortable," Roger replies, pulling Cora close as he speaks. "We really did put hospitality on it, making sure they have everything they could want. And the suite they're in is nice, if indeed guarded. But no, we didn't find much else out, and we won't until tomorrow. We're having dad come we know he'll want to be in on the conversation."

"Oh, good," I reply, leaning into Sinclair and looking up at him. "What do you think?"

"Overall?" he says, looking down at me. "I think Sarah is who she says she is. And if that's true then..." he sighs, shaking his head, "I think we're going to hear a very sad story tomorrow. I can't imagine what life must have been like, for two human girls raised in Xander's home."

And my heart sinks to think of it – Of the world from which they escaped, a world in which it's logical to let your niece live in an orphanage her whole life and then, when the time is right, to swap sperm samples at her sister's clinic and then try to steal the baby that resulted from that deception.

If I have already suffered so much at the hand of a man I've never met...

What must they have suffered as two humans serving in his home?

Chapter 415 – Awake

I'm up very early the next morning, my mind instantly on poor Sarah, poor Jessica, somewhere in the palace, probably worried about what on earth is coming next.

I slowly pull my body from its warm place at Sinclair's side, grimacing as I try not to disturb him as much as I can – he's so cute, my big tough Alpha, all vulnerable and sleeping and

"Just go, Ella," he murmurs, his eyes still shut. I laugh a little, softly –

Because of course he felt me go every sense is attuned to me, to my safety. his

"All right, Dominic," I murmur, leaning in to press a very soft kiss to his mouth. "But you stay asleep."

"Noo problem," he whispers, and then turns over as I roll to my side of the bed and quickly stand up. I give him a little glance over my shoulder – admiring the tanned muscles of his back for just a second – before leaning down to pick up my little baby.

Rafe is, as he usually is, awake and quiet, waiting for me to come and get him as I always do.

"Lovely little baby," I murmur to him, nudging him with my nose as I take him over to his changing table to get him started for his day. "How did I get so lucky as to have such a good boy? Not even crying in the morning, so his mama can rest."

Rafe gives a happy little squeal that makes me laugh, but it also makes me glance over my shoulder at my mate- because I don't want to wake him. But Sinclair stays still, his shoulders moving gently with his soft breathing. Good – I want him to get his rest.

I change Rafe as quickly as I can and then take him into our gigantic closet to feed him while I pick out my clothes for the day. When Rafe's finished eating I'm about to put him into his car seat so that I can take a shower, but a dark shadow falls over me.

"Give him here," Sinclair murmurs, and I turn to smile at him as I hand the baby over.

"How did you know?" I ask, curious.

"Baby told me," Sinclair says, smirking down at Rafe.

"What!?"

"Down the bond," Sinclair clarifies, leaning close to give me a kiss on the cheek. "He didn't want to go in the car seat. He called for me."

“Clever baby,” I say, a little awed as I peer at my son, who burbles happily up at his dad. “That’s amazing.”

“He just wants to be held,” Sinclair says, giving a little shrug. “When you go to put him down, he calls for me instead of crying, like a human baby would. Not that amazing – just a... different way of letting his parents know what he wants and needs.” Then he heads back to the bed with the baby, probably to check his phone and relax, while I take my shower and get dressed. When I come out, Sinclair passes Rafe back to me and then gets ready himself and I dress the baby.

The result of this early morning is that we’re the first ones in the sunny breakfast room in which we’ll be meeting Sarah and Jessica. I tap my fingers on the table, staring at the door, before Sinclair places a passive hand on mine, making me stop.

“You’re not going to hurry them by worrying about it,” he murmurs, looking down at his phone, where he’s fielding about a thousand messages from the hundreds of ventures he’s started working on since our return from the bunker.

I scowl, knowing that he’s right, but hating it anyway. So rather than sit still, I take Rafe from the table to a small living area on the far side of the room and spread out a little blanket for us so that we can have a little play time before everyone else arrives.

I laugh for nearly half an hour straight as I play with my little boy, marveling at him. He’s just...already gotten so big, I can’t believe it. And he’s so bright, and sweet, and cheerful – god, I can barely believe that he’s mine. He’s fulfilled every wish I ever had about a mom – and beyond that, has allowed me to access a level of love and joy that I honestly didn’t know I was capable of.

“Sweet baby prince,” I murmur to him, leaning over to blow a raspberry on his little belly. “Do you know how cute you are!? And how much we love you!?”

Rafe gives a little squeal of affirmation and I feel a pulse down our bond – a little happy joy from his heart to mine.

“Oh my goodness,” I murmur, laying down on the floor next to him, bringing my face close to his and letting him reach out his little pudgy hands to touch my cheeks and my nose. As he does, I smile so hard it hurts. “Little baby Rafe,” I murmur, kissing his hands. “You are everything to me.”

“I don’t know about this,” a voice above me says, and I jump a little and then laugh when I see Sinclair standing above us, his arms crossed over his chest in mock anger. “I don’t know if I like the idea of this little guy stealing my best girl’s heart.”

I laugh harder, sitting up.

“Seriously,” Sinclair says, leaning over and pretending to talk to Rafe alone now, who just giggles up at him. “You’d better knock it off, kid – it used to be me she talked to that way -”

“Don’t be jealous,” I sigh, taking Sinclair’s hand and tugging him down so that he sits on the floor next to us. “I can love you both.”

“Yeah well,” he murmurs, bringing his face close to mine and then dropping his head slightly so that he can run his lips over the skin of my neck. “Just make sure you always keep me at the top of your list of men you love, all right?”

“Oh, sure,” I say, rolling my eyes. And we’ll see how well you do at that once you have a daughter to steal your heart.”

“I’ll just pretend she’s a boy.”

I laugh now, both at his words and the soft tickly feeling of his lips on my skin. “Oh sure,” I say, sarcastic, “you’d just love that. A little girl tramping around with Rafe and Cora’s son, getting into all the messes that boys do? There’s no part of you that would overreact to her being in any kind of danger as she played boys’ sports, participated in boys’ activities, learning how to fight and be an Alpha.”

“If she’s your daughter? She can handle it.”

“No, Dominic,” I say, soft now, pulling my head back a little to look into his face. “Your daughter would be strong enough to handle that, to handle anything. You’d make her strong, like you do me and Rafe.”

I see the way he melts a little then, the way his eyes go soft as he looks at me, truly hears my words. “Trouble,” he growls, lifting hand to my cheek and resting his forehead against mine, “you’re the heart of everything. There is no strength without you.”

And then my mate presses his lips to mine, and our little baby gives a happy giggle, and I swear that my heart...will probably explode with happiness at any moment.

But before it can, we both hear the door open.

“Is...anyone here?” It’s Cora’s voice.

“Here!” I call after I break our kiss and take a second to clear my choked throat. I raise a hand and waive it so that Cora can see me.

Sinclair takes the opportunity to kiss me again, just briefly, as Cora, Roger, and Henry come over to us at the far side of the room. And then we both smile up at our family as they come into view.

“Why am I not surprised that you’re doing something bizarre?” Roger asks, frowning at us a little and putting his hands on his hips.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“You have an entire mahogany table with velvet-lined chairs,” Cora explains, waiving at the room, “as well as a full breakfast buffet set out. And yet the two of you are over here, sitting on the floor and making out?”

I laugh and roll my eyes at my sister, getting to my knees and then lifting Rafe into my arms. “You have no sense of fun, Cora,” I chide. Sinclair stands and puts out a hand to me, helping me to my feet.

“I have plenty of sense of fun -” she protests, crossing her arms. “I just like a cup of coffee first.”

“Well,” I say, gesturing towards the full pot of coffee waiting hot on the buffet, “help yourself, sister mine!”

“Um,” a sound comes from the door, and we all turn towards it. Sarah and Jessica are standing there, hand-in-hand, a guard in black standing behind them. “I’m so sorry – are we... interrupting?”

I blush a little – god, I’m supposed to be a queen, and this is the picture we’re presenting? Laying on the floor and bickering over who is more fun, the queen or the duchess?

“Please,” I say, hurrying across the room to stand in front of Sarah and Jessica, who I note are clean, and wearing fresh new clothes, and looking rested and happy. Or at least, happier than they did yesterday. “Won’t you come in and have some breakfast? We’re so excited to see you.”

I give them my best smile as they accept my invitation into the room, but as they move to fill their plates with some breakfast something in my stomach sinks a little. Because I’ve been having what is frankly a wonderful morning...but I know that things are about to get very, very dark.

Chapter 416 – Sarah’s Story

Ila

As Sarah and Jessica come to sit down at the table, I’m surprised to see Henry take the lead in speaking to them. I get a little cup of coffee for myself, and a bowl of sliced fruit – honestly, I’m going to be too distracted to eat much and listen interestedly to the start of the conversation.

I don’t know why I’m so surprised, but Henry really does shock me with how charming he is with Sarah and Jessica, immediately putting them at ease as he asks them very simple, easy questions about who they are and what they like. He doesn’t delve into any of the big questions that I’m sure we’ll get into soon where they lived, how they lived, and why they ran but instead 1 does a wonderful job of showing his interest in who they are as people.

As I sit down at my place next to Sinclair and begin to sip at my coffee, I’m interested to see how Henry concentrates his attention on Jessica. She’s so young and so shy at first, but his questions about what she likes – reading, and animals – and what she dislikes – cold weather, chores – really allow Jessica to open up. I see Sarah smiling warmly at her sister and then at Henry as she, too, sees Jessica shed her shyness and become the lovely, happy little girl that Sarah must know at home.

“Yes!” Jessica says, enthusiastic. “I love dogs! I wish I had one! We used to have one, but...” she hesitates, and then looks up at Sarah, biting her lip.

“Master Xander had lots of dogs,” Sarah says, smiling around at us. There was a puppy that we liked best of all we...called him our dog. Frisky, we said his name was.”

“Because,” Jessica says, laughing, ” He was always so playful! And he liked to get into trouble.”

I smile at the little girl, laughing and imagining her with the little dog. But I notice that Sarah’s face turns sad, and she looks away from Jessica, not wanting her to see. My own face falls as I realize that...this story must not have a nice ending. And that Sarah doesn’t want Jessica to remember that.

Luckily, Henry jumps in. “Well,” he says, raising his eyebrows at Jessica. Did you know that there is a mama cat, here in the palace? Who had her kittens just about a month ago?”

Jessica’s eyes go completely round as she gasps at the news. Henry leans forward, smiling at her.” Would you like to play with them?”

“Oh!” Jessica says, clasping her hands together and holding them tight under her chin.

“Yes, please! Oh, I would like that very much!”

Henry looks over at my mate, who smiles and nods, letting him know it’s a good idea – and then Henry rolls away to a corner of the room, where he presses a button on an intercom and says a few words to whoever is on the other end.

As he does, I look over at Jessica who is beaming with excitement, and then down at my own baby, who sitting on my lap and blowing bubbles, grasping at the table cloth and generally exploring his world. When I look up at Sarah, I smile to see that her eyes are on Rafe as well.

She looks up and meets my eyes, her own face breaking out into a big smile to match mine. And I can see...a sort of pride there, in that she was able to help this little baby, to keep him safe with me.

Gratitude races through me first, and then, after it, a deep determination to give this woman everything she needs to build a life. She has given me everything – and I’m determined to give it back.

Before I can say anything, though, a young woman peeks through the door and we can all already hear the kittens mewing. Jessica gasps and stands right up on her chair, trying to get a better look as Henry beckons the young woman forward and directs her to the back of the room.

“Oh, Sarah,” Jessica says, her voice full of pleading as Sarah scolds her and tugs her down off the chair. “Please, please can I go and play with them?”

“If...that’s all right?” Sarah asks, looking around at the rest of us.

I nod eagerly, wanting the little girl to enjoy herself. And so Sarah lets her sister dash off to the living area at the back of the room, completely distracted.

“Well, that was nicely done,” I murmur to Sinclair, peering at Henry who follows Jessica to the back of the room to ensure that she’s settled.

“Henry is full of tact,” my mate murmurs back, smiling proudly after his dad. “You should have seen the clever things he did to convince Roger and me to go to bed when we were kids. We were hoodwinked left and right.”

“I hope you remember these tactics,” I sigh, watching Henry come back to his place at the table. Cora stands up, fetching Sarah a refill on her cup of tea as Sarah looks around at all of us.

“Thank you,” Sarah says, especially to Henry but looking around at us all. “I -I am

grateful to have her out of earshot. I know you have questions, and I want to tell you everything but..." she glances over at her sister, who is giggling madly as she lays on the floor, letting kittens climb all over her. "Well, I don't think Jessica needs to relive any of it, or hear details which I've tried very hard to keep from her.'

"We understand," Cora says, setting the fresh cup of tea down next to Sarah and setting in her seat between Sarah and Roger.

Sarah takes a deep breath then, pressing her lips together as she looks around at us. "Well, then," she says, giving a little shrug. "Where can I begin?"

Sinclair and Roger take a larger role now, falling into some of their interrogation patterns that I recognize from our time at the bunker, as elsewhere. But I am very pleased to note that both of them – despite their eagerness to get all the information they want and need from Sarah – are careful to be warm, and kind, and conversational.

Henry intercedes at certain moments, pressing Sarah for a little more information when he needs it, but he's mostly silent.

Cora and I, though we don't ask the questions, are actually the ones to whom Sarah speaks, even though Sinclair and Roger are the one who ask the questions. It's not that she neglects the men in the room, but...I'm not really sure why, but as she tells us her story, I find that her eyes are on our faces, her words directed to us. Perhaps it's because Cora and I react more emotionally to the story, gasping and leaning forward, mumbling our empathy when things get tough, but either way –

As Sarah's story unfolds, it's clear that she's more comfortable telling it to us. And so Sinclair and Roger lean back in their chairs, letting Cora and I take the lead.

And the story that Sarah tells us...it's as sad as I thought it would be.

"I was born in that house," Sarah says quietly, her eyes a bit far-off. "I don't remember being anywhere else as a child – not really. I didn't go to school, I didn't have any friends – honestly, I'm not sure I knew that other children existed for a long, long time. My mother was only allowed to keep me – to keep us – because she promised that we could be raised to be obedient. That we would...replace her, when she became old and infirm."

"And your father?" Henry asks, gentle phrasing the question so that Sarah can answer it in any way that is comfortable for her.

"I never knew him," Sarah says, looking around at us, unashamed of the fact but seeming confused by it. "I don't even know if Jessica and I have the same..." her head dips while she clears her throat a little before looking back up at us, taking a deep

breath. Mother always said she would tell us when we were old enough to know. But then...she died before we were old enough, I guess.”

I look Sarah over, sympathy in my eyes. Because while she had a mother who loved her and was present in her life, her reality was in so many ways so much more brutal than mine. Because I had Cora at my side – and we always had hope of a different, better life.

And Sarah, she’s about mine and Cora’s age now, but we both have so much that she doesn’t have. My heart aches for her.

“Sarah,” Cora says, turning my attention to her. “What happened to your mother?”

Chapter 417 – Vengeance

Cora asks Sarah about her mother in a frank, curious way that I think allows Sarah to straighten her spine and answer impassively, like she's giving a report to a doctor instead of having to break a hard truth to a queen who will probably break into tears. And I smile a little at the back of my sister's head, grateful for her for giving Sarah what she needs when I can't.

"He beat her," Sarah says, and my heart twists almost physically within me. "She...she was growing older, and she couldn't do her chores the way she used to. And..." Sarah bites her lip and looks only at Cora now, telling her what she wouldn't be able to say to the rest of us, not while holding her head high. "And he started to look at me, the way he looked at my mother. And she tried to keep me away from him, to find other chores in other parts of the house. And when he figured out what she was doing he..."

Sarah's voice cracks here and I have to look away from her so that my eyes don't fill with tears. Sinclair slips a hand onto my knee, wanting to give me comfort but not to distract from Sarah's story.

Sarah takes a deep breath before she continues. "He told her she was an idiot and a whore, for trying to keep his property from him. And that he could do what we wanted with all of us take our bodies, our lives. And then," she shrugs, looking down at the tablecloth. "He did. He took her life then, to show her...and to show me."

I make myself look back at Sarah now, who looks up at Cora, and then at me. And I hope that she sees, shining in my eyes, my deep and renewed desire for vengeance. Because there is absolutely no way that I am going to let this man live.

"That was the moment," she says, nodding to me and then looking at Sinclair too, though a little shier now. "When mother died? I decided that...that if he could take what I loved most from me, I could take what he most wanted too. The little baby – I could...I could take that away from him. And so I did or, I tried."

"You succeeded," Sinclair says quietly, next to me.

"No," she says, shaking her head vehemently and looking down at her hands. "You'd have been safe anyway – you'd have figured it out."

"The note," Roger says, leaning around Cora to look clearly at Sarah, to make sure she hears him. "It gave us an advantage that...without it, Sarah, they very well could have taken Rafe. We owe you a great debt."

"No," she says instantly, flushing red. "I don't – I don't want anything. And I don't want you to think that I did this so that you would give me anything."

“We don’t think that, Sarah,” I say softly, hugging my baby close and leaning forward to catch her eye. “But we want to help you, like we want to help the other refugees. Though I admit,” my mouth cocks into a little smile here, “I do want to help you a little bit more than the others. Because I’m so, so grateful. I mean, what would you like – you can have anything!” My face splits into a wide grin here as I point at my sister’s mate. “You can even take Roger! He’s the least useful-

Cora gives a little squeak of protest as Sinclair bursts into laughter and Roger turns to glare at me, his mouth falling open. Sarah starts to laugh too as she realizes my joke and shake her head, rather vehemently, no.

But seeing Sarah decline my offer, Roger turns his shock on her.

“Wait, you don’t want me either!?” he gasps, and we all start to laugh harder as he sinks back into his chair, playing along now and exaggerating his fury for the sake of the mood in the room. Because...frankly, we need a laugh.

And I want Sarah to know that we hear her but...well, I want to give her some of the hope that Cora and I always had. That things can get better – and they will. And maybe that starts today, with a little laughter at Roger’s willing expense. I turn an apologetic look his way but he just gives me a wink, understanding, and I turn back to Sarah.

“We’ll talk about it, okay?” I say, still holding my baby tight. “But...we’re going to be friends now, Sarah. Good friends friends for life. And friends help each other get back on their feet.”

Sarah’s smile is slow, but when it reaches its full extent I swear my heart could burst with joy of it. Because I see it there that hope I was looking for.

And I intend to keep every part of my word. Sarah is going to have a good life, and I’m going to help her get it.

“Ohhhh, Sarah!” Jessica moans, running over with two kittens, one in each hand, her eyes filled with worry and woe. “Please, please can we keep them?” She looks down at the little orange ball of fur and then at the grey one, her voice a little frantic. “I love them so much – I can’t you have to let me keep them!”

“Oh, Jessica,” Sarah sighs, putting her arms out and wrapping them around her little sister. “We don’t even have a home to take them to yet -”

“And they’re too young,” Henry adds, looking at Jessica seriously, “to leave their mother. Perhaps in a few weeks, when they’re ready? You and your sister can talk about it again?”

Jessica groans with grief at the idea of leaving the two little kittens, making me laugh a little.

“Well, you can stay here until we find you a home of your own,” I say, crossing my fingers under the table a bit as I make this rather reckless offer without even asking my mate. “So you can still see them every day, Jessica. When you’re not at school, of course.”

“School?” she says, looking at me with wide eyes. “I – I get to go to school?”

“Yes!” I say, surprised and looking at Sarah, who gives me a big smile and nods excitedly. “Yes, Jessica. School every day, and kittens at night. Does that sound like a good start to your new life?”

And a little tear runs down Sarah’s cheek as Jessica says a vehement yes, cuddling the little cats close to her chest. I look up at Sinclair then, hoping that he’ll say.

But he’s already nodding, which makes me burst into a grin. And then he leans forward, pressing a kiss to my forehead. My sweet, good mate, he murmurs to me down our bond. You’ll be a wonderful queen.

And warmth spreads through me at the idea of it – because if being queen means I get to do things like this? Then I’m definitely on board, and excited.

But that warmth is chased a bit with anger, and sadness, and rage.

Because even if we can help Sarah and Jessica...Xander’s still out there in the world, and more men like him. And we’ve got work to do to take them out of it.

Work I am very, very determined to pursue.

Chapter 418 – The Threat of War

Ella

Cora and Roger stay in the meeting room for a little breakfast as Henry escorts Sarah and Jessica from the room, wheeling beside them as they discuss some preliminary plans for Jessica's schooling and Sarah's own desires and ideas about her future life. I smile as Sinclair and I walk slowly behind them, Rafe curled protected in the curve of his father's arm. I wave to my new friends as they and Henry take a left when Sinclair and I have to go right, towards our rooms.

And then, as we make the turn and are finally on our own, I huff a little sigh. Sinclair, as always, notices.

"What's wrong, little queen?" he murmurs, moving closer to me as we walk. "I thought you'd be happy with the result of that. You did a good thing for her and, I imagine, will keep doing so. Plus, we got some very useful information about Xander."

"Was it anything we didn't already know?" I ask, looking up at him with a frown.

"A few things," he murmurs, giving a shrug. "But more importantly, she's a witness we will be able to charge Xander, formally, with...well, I guess we'd need a lawyer to spell out specifically which crimes he committed in switching sperm at a sperm bank and then attempting to kidnap the resulting child."

Rafe gives a little burble right at that moment, making me laugh and smile over at him – my sweet baby, almost as if he knew he was being talked about.

"Well, that's something," I murmur, considering it. "Will we charge him, though?"

"I'm not sure," Sinclair says. "Not that I want to let him off the hook for everything he's done – we just...need to figure out the best way to go about it, especially as he's now with the Atalaxians."

We've reached the door to our room now and Sinclair twists the knob, pushing the door open and allowing me to enter first. I head immediately to our gigantic walk-in closet to get changed into more comfortable clothing, but my mind whirs as I go.

"Go on, little mate," Sinclair murmurs as he follows me into the closet, sitting down on a chaise lounge that I had placed in here just for this reason. I anticipate many little chats in here as either or both of us are getting ready. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"Well," I say, tugging off my dress and sighing as I put it back on its hanger. "It's...it's the Atalaxians I'm worried about," I say, giving him a sorry little grimace.

“What do you mean?” he asks, settling back on the chaise and listening carefully. I give him a little smile and a pulse of gratitude down the bond. It means so much to me that he takes me seriously.

“I mean,” I say, grabbing for a pair of comfortable folded pants, “that I’m not sure we should be...messaging with them. I mean – you heard everything that Sarah said today about what life in Xander’s household was like – it was an absolute nightmare for her, and for Jessica, and her mother. Just years of abuse, justified because they were humans and women.”

I sigh as I pull a t-shirt over my head and look at my mate, my eyes full of sorrow. “The idea that Xander would go to the Atalaxians, hat in hand, and they would see him and be like ‘sure!

Come on in! Your kind welcome here!’” I shake my head, pursing my lips. “It makes me really uncomfortable, Dominic. I...I don’t want anything to do with people like that.”

He sighs, nodding his head and understanding, but also turning a hand upwards towards me in supplication. “Part of ruling is dealing with people whom you intensely dislike. Atalaxia is a powerful nation no matter how much we disagree with their policies, we can’t just...ignore them, or give them the cold shoulder.”

“But shouldn’t we?” I ask, understanding him but unable to resist pushing back a little bit. I come close to my mate then, reaching out and running my fingers through his dark hair as I look down into his face, and then down at my baby. “Everything I’ve heard about them, Dominic, suggests that they’re participating in...atrocities, serious crimes against humanity.”

“Crimes of which we have no real proof, my love – ”

“But how hard would that proof be to find?” I murmur. “I mean, I had one conversation with one woman in a refugee camp, and we have testimony against Xander now. If abuse is as widespread in Atalaxia as I’m being told it is, would we even really have to scratch the surface to find proof of it?”

“And if we did,” Sinclair murmurs, looking seriously up at me. “What would you have us do as a result?”

“I don’t know,” I say, shaking my head as I look down at him, sighing with my worry and my fear. “I’m really not – not trying to talk you into anything, Dominic, or persuade you one way or another. I just...I know that to not oppose tyranny is in some ways to accept it, support it. And if we have the power...”

“Would you go so far as to want to go to war over it?” he asks, quiet but genuine. I go

pale at the idea, because I am so... so sick of war.

All I want is to build my life, and raise my child, and live peacefully with my mate.

But would I buy that piece at the expense of others? Would I allow innocents to suffer so that I can sleep peacefully in bed?

I bite my lip and Sinclair clicks his tongue in sympathy, raising a hand to cup my cheek, his thumb tracing my skin. "I'm sorry, love," he sighs. "That wasn't a fair question – you have all good points, and I gave you the one ultimatum that would stop you."

"No," I say, shaking my head and covering his hand with mine. "It's...it's the reality though, isn't it? If I'm saying to stand up to the Atalaxians... the result could be war."

"It could be war either way," he says, his voice soft and worried.

"Really?" I ask, my stomach dropping.

Slowly, he nods. "They're not happy, at all, with the fact that the secrecy pact was broken, and that my response to it isn't immediate denigration of the human race to second-class citizenship. They are very hostile now, at the moment. I will avoid war at all costs but...they're strong, Ella. They could push for it, knowing they have the advantage."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath through my nose, anxiety racing through me at the idea.

War. War again.

Just when I'm finally starting to find peace...

"We're not there yet," Sinclair says, dropping his hand to drift down my side and settle on my waist, pulling me closer. "Don't worry about it now, Ella. Don't borrow trouble before it comes."

"Can't seem to help it," I murmur, opening my eyes and looking down at my mate. "Like calls to like, after all."

He laughs then, the sound so deep and warm that it makes me smile. Then he tugs me closer, pulling me into his lap. "Let me worry about that," he says softly. "You just go patch up the people who were hurt by our last war it's what I know you want to be doing anyway."

"Hey," I say, narrowing my eyes playfully at him and kissing him lightly. "Don't you start

thinking of me as some kind of magical street sweeper – I'm not just around to clean up after all this nation's wars, you know! I am not the panacea you seek!"

"Oh I know," he murmurs, teasing me with his lips on mine as he lets his hand drift lower to settle on my bottom. "If you're busy cleaning up after all the wars, you'll be far too busy for me to get you pregnant with all of the heirs I'm planning to produce-

I burst into laughter at this, pulling away from him and pretending to be offended even though, really, we're both well aware that that's precisely what I want too. "Hey, Mr. King Sinclair," I growl, wrinkling my nose at him. "I'm no royal baby factory either."

He scoffs and rolls his eyes, pretending to be frustrated. "Then what are you even good for, Ella!?"

I laugh, a little wicked, and pull his face close. "You know exactly what I'm good for, Dominic." And then I kiss him soundly, and let myself get a little lost in it.

And then we put the baby down for his nap, and I am...much later reporting for duty at the refugee camp than I thought I'd be.

Chapter 419 – Come for Dinner

Ella

When I finally come out of my bedroom, Rafe strapped to my chest, and hurry through the hallways to the front of the palace where I asked Cora to wait for me, I find her sitting with crossed arms and a frustrated look on her face.

“Oh hey, Ella,” she says, smirking at me. “What took you so long.”

I just beam innocently at my sister, flicking my hair over my shoulder. “I don’t know what you mean, Cora. I came as fast as I could.”

“Oh,” she says, raising her eyebrows at me. “I’m sure you did.”

And then I burst into laughter as I realize that Cora – well. Cora hasn’t precisely been one to make dirty jokes in the past, has she? “Looks like Roger’s rubbing off on you,” I say, putting out a hand to help her up, which she accepts.

“He’s trying,” she says, giving me a wink and leaning down to give Rafe a kiss on his forehead. “Are you ready? Finally?”

“Oh, come on, Cora,” I say, rolling my eyes as we head for the door. “It wasn’t like it was that long of a wait.”

“Forty-five minutes! Honestly, Ella – it’s not a quickie anymore if it takes the better part of an hour – ”

“Cora!” I hiss, covering Rafe’s innocent ears and looking around at all of the people milling around at the front of the palace. “They’ll hear you!”

She laughs. “Oh, come on, Ella, they all know too. Do you know how many people asked me where Sinclair has been? I’ve been making excuses for you for well over half an hour and everyone saw right through them -”

“Oh my god,” I say as we step out the front door and find Conner waiting for us. “We will cease speaking of this! Immediately!”

“Good plan,” she says, laughing along with me as we make our way down to the cars waiting for us. We hit the road quickly after I strap Rafe into his safety seat, heading directly for the Human Camp. When we arrive, I see that Sinclair has again sent a relative army of guards, and that Isabel and Hank are waiting for us outside of the gates.

Fortunately, today they seem to be peacefully chatting, rather than standing coldly. I smile at them as I get out of the car, grateful that Isabel is as good as her word in trying

to be better at accepting humans as part of the team.

“What kept you?” Hank says, coming closer to us and smiling his greeting but – characteristically – keeping his hands in his pockets and refraining from giving us a hug. I resist the urge myself, knowing it would just make him uncomfortable.

Cora smirks and opens her mouth to tell him precisely what kept us, but I step forward and beat her to it. “We were getting Sarah settled this morning,” I say, smiling at both Hank and Isabel, who were updated last night on everything we know about Sarah and Jessica. “She was kind enough to tell us her story.”

“Oh good,” Isabel says, nodding to us. “I hope that it gave you both some clarity and that you’ll be able to help her in the way that she’s helped you.” She leans down to coo to Rafe now, greeting him. The baby gratifies her by kicking happily and waving his little hands, making us both laugh.

Then, as a group of eight – nine, if you count Rafe – we head into the camp to get to work. We head again to the children’s hospitalization tent, as both Isabel and Hank identified important cases which need my immediate attention. There, we fall into our routines, all of us wanting to help as many people as fast as we can, especially considering our delay in getting here this afternoon. I grimace when I think of my stolen hour, regretting it. Tomorrow I’ll try to get here earlier so I can really help as much as I can.

When I stand up from my third patient of the afternoon, I’m surprised when Hank brings up Sarah again.

“So, she’s all right?” he asks, flipping through the next patient’s chart.

“Who?” I ask, confused.

“Sarah,” he murmurs. “And Jessica,” he adds, a little bit of an afterthought. I smile a little, watching him as he pointedly doesn’t look at me, flipping through pages which I know he’s already read.

“She’s fine, Hank,” I say, purposefully keeping my voice breezy. “She’s going to stay at the palace for awhile – for as long as she wants, really, until she decides where she wants to live. Jessica seems really happy – she met some kittens, and is going to start going to school.”

“Good,” Hank says, letting the clipboard fall to his side and looking deliberately away from me, in the direction of our next patient. I can’t help that my smile grows a little bit as I wonder just how much Hank has been thinking about the pretty, wounded dark-haired woman whose sister we saved yesterday.

But as I study him, I consider that it could honestly go either way. He's very cryptic, isn't he? Is he asking out of professional curiosity for a doctor regarding a patient? Or...

"Next case is over here," he says, stalking off. I look up at Conner, who grins down at me as we follow. I laugh a little, thinking that if Conner is picking up on it too...

Well.

Perhaps there's a little meddling to be done.

"You know, Hank," I say as we arrive at the next hospital bed, taking the charts from his hand and flipping through them even though I have no idea what they say. "You should come over for dinner sometime. At the palace. Catch up with us, like old friends."

"Catch up?" he says, his voice dry. "Old friends?"

"Sure," I say, looking up at him with too-wide eyes.

"Ella," he sighs, laughing a little as he shakes his head at me. "The idea of old times' with me and your family means I'm either going to be watching you die slowly in bed or getting punched in the face for crimes I didn't commit. So...maybe let's cut that as an excuse."

I laugh here, genuinely surprised by his sense of humor. I mean, he's dead on and definitely seeing through my ploy.

"Well then come for new times, Hank," I say, grinning at him. "It will be fun. I mean... Sarah could be there."

"Give me this," he mumbles, snatching at the chart in my hands, looking for a distraction from this conversation so I don't notice the little flush in his cheeks.

"Hey, I was reading that!" I protest, laughing and holding the chart out of his reach.

"You don't even understand what it says," he chides, glaring at me a little but unable to help the little smile that pulls at the corner of his lips.

"Well, a girl can learn, can't she?" I say, lofty. But I hand the chart to him with a wink.

"Think on it," I say. And then I look up at Conner. "You can come too! It will be a party!"

"Oh," he says, genuinely surprised at the invitation as he takes the baby from me. "Um, I'm not sure that's appropriate, Luna...I mean. I can't... hang out with the King."

“Why not?” I ask, confused.

“Because he’s the king, Ella,” Hank replies, rolling his eyes at me again good-naturedly. “You’re just too used to him to see how intimidating he is to literally everyone else.”

“Ohhh,” I say, waving a hand behind me as I dismiss what they’re saying. “Dominic is nice!”

“Nice,” I hear Conner murmur to Hank behind me. “She just described the most powerful Alpha in the kingdom – maybe the world as nice.”

“Yeah, she’s...Ella.” Hank sighs.

But I ignore them, smiling down at the little brown-haired girl looking sadly up at me. “Hi, sweetheart,” I say to her, reaching out and offering my hand. “My name is Ella. What’s yours?”

Chapter 420 – Thanks, but No Thanks

Ella

I'm quite tired when evening approaches in the refugee camp and Cora comes to my side, placing a hand on my back and telling me that we should probably head home. I sigh, looking around, knowing that I can do more but...

"I get it, Ells," she says, looking around with me. "But there's only so much we can do. And you're a queen and a mom as much as a healer now. You've got to find a balance."

"Is it normal to feel guilty?" I ask my sister, who has been working to heal people for much longer than I have. "When you prioritize yourself, and other things, even though you know you can help people who are suffering?"

"It is," Cora says with a little sigh. "

But you, my big-hearted sister, probably feel it more keenly than most.

"Yeah," I say, glancing over at Hank. "He, for instance, compartmentalizes well."

"Don't count Hank out," she says softly, shaking her head. "He's got a big heart too. Maybe just...hides it better."

I turn my head a little, considering him, considering her point. And then my heart aches for him again as I think of how disappointed he was when Cora left him for her mate – because as much as he loved her, we know now that he never stood a chance. Cora and Roger were written in the stars.

But is there someone out there for Hank too?

I hope, quite desperately, that there is. He's so good, and he deserves that, like the rest of us.

"Ready, Luna?" Conner asks, coming over and bringing my baby with him, who reaches for me with his little grasping hands.

"Sure am!" I say, taking my baby and cuddling him close. Cora laughs and leans in as well, fussing over Rafe and I can see thinking about her own little baby, who will be here so much sooner than she realizes. Together, we start to walk out of the tent, but as I turn I hear a little voice calling me back.

"Hey, wolf lady!" a little boy calls, and I turn and laugh to see little Benny running for me.

"Well hey," I say, falling to one knee and wrapping him in a hug as he runs over. "How

are you feeling, Bens?"

"It's Benny," he corrects with a little frown, making me smile as he adjusts a set of glasses on his nose. Then, he peers down at Rafe. "Is this your baby?"

"Yup," I say, turning Rafe a little so Benny can see him better. "What do you think of him?"

"I think he's fat," Benny murmurs, reaching out a hand to poke Rafe's belly. I burst out laughing at this, honestly charmed. "He's not fat, he's a baby! They're supposed to be chubby so that they can grow big and strong."

"Well," Benny says, his eyes going wide as they're still fastened on Rafe. "This one's gonna be real big and strong, then."

I laugh again, harder this time as Cora crouches down next to us. "Who are you?" Benny asks, looking Cora up and down.

Cora introduces herself as my sister and Benny narrows his eyes at her. "Oh," he says. "Are you the human one?"

"Yes," she replies, her eyebrows going up. "Does my reputation proceed me?"

"Um, I don't know what that means," Benny replies, blinking at her and making me laugh again, "but she told me she has a human sister," he continues, nodding towards me. "So, you can't turn into a wolf?"

"Unfortunately not," she says, giving a little shrug. "But I'm going to have a baby soon," she says, her hand settling on her stomach, "and he's going to be able to do it."

"Oh," Benny says, his own eyebrows going up now. Then he takes a moment to think before speaking again. "Does that mean he's going to be fat too?"

I burst into real laughter at this, falling back a little with the force of it so that Cora has to reach out a hand and steady me as she grins between us.

"I don't know," Cora says, grinning at Benny, as delighted as I am. "I guess we'll just have to see, won't we?"

"Hey, Benny," Isabel says, coming to stand by his side and offering her hand. "You know you're not supposed to sneak out of bed – Dr. Hank said two more days of bed rest before you're cleared to go to the children's home."

"Dr. Hank is fulla soup!" Benny says, crossing his arms and frowning up at Isabel. The

sincere disbelief and frustration in this kid set me off laughing again and Benny turns to grin at me. He takes Isabel's hand, though. "I don't feel sick at all, since the lady came yesterday!" he protests, pointing at me. "I should be allowed to go and find my mom!"

My laughter dies a little as he mentions his mother again, but I do my best not to let it show in my face.

"I know, kid," Isabel says, grinning down at him and giving me a wink. "Maybe we'll have Dr. Hank come and look at you again, see if you can't go tomorrow."

Satisfied with this, Benny nods and consents to be led back to bed, calling his goodbyes to us over his shoulder.

I stand up with Cora, sighing and watching him go.

"He reminds me of you," she says, and I look over at her in surprise to see a big grin on her face as she watches the little boy get tucked back into his bed.

"Really?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says, turning to me with a smile. "So full of life, ready to question everything even though the world has dealt him a tough hand. He's got Ella Reina vibes for sure."

I purse my lips together, trying not to let my sincere pleasure show on my face at the compliment. Because even if Cora meant it as a compliment for Benny...well, he's just so damn cute, and vivid, and determined that I can't help but be pleased with the idea that I am anything like him.

"Oh geeze," Cora says, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and turning Rafe and I towards the entrance to the tent.

"What!?" I protest, confused.

"Let's get you out of here," she murmurs. "Before you start adopting kids."

And I laugh but...I don't really protest.

Because, as a former orphan myself? I know how important it is for these children to find homes and families that love them. And I certainly have enough love in my heart to make that a reality for a kid like I used to be, a kid like Benny.

I just...wonder what Sinclair would think of the idea. Even just hypothetically. I'm still wondering on it when Cora nudges me with her elbow as we pass through the gates of the camp.

“Hmm?” I ask, inviting her to tell me what she’s thinking.

“I know we’ve kind of left it off the table for a bit, Ella,” she says, looking over at me seriously. “But...I wanted to talk to you about all of this wedding business.”

“Oh!” I say, my eyes going wide and eager. And then I laugh, shaking my head as Conner opens the back door of the car for me. I murmur my thanks to him and begin to strap Rafe into his car seat as Cora goes around to the other side. “Honestly, I’m glad you remembered, Cora – because I honestly keep forgetting to talk to you about it amongst everything else that’s been on our plates the past few days. But Sinclair is really excited about it! He thinks it’s important!”

Cora bites her lip a little as we close our doors and buckle ourselves in.

“Oh no,” I say, seeing her expression and reaching for her hand over top of Rafe’s carrier. “Oh, Cora, you don’t want to do it?”

“It’s not that I don’t see the importance of it, Ella,” she says, shaking her head a little as she takes my hand. “Or that I’m not grateful for you and Sinclair for offering this to us but...” she sighs and I hold her gaze as Conner begins to drive us home. “Honestly, Ella, I know I’ve never talked about getting married before, and that this whole idea of a mating ceremony for me is incredibly new, but...it’s more important to me than I thought it would be.”

I nod, understanding, listening.

“And,” she continues, “I...I want something that really reflects me and Roger. That’s small, and intimate, and feels...special to us. Not...like a spectacle for the whole nation.”

“I understand,” I say, softly. Because as wonderful as my own big ceremony was for me, it really was just for me. And Cora, I know, has been waiting for just the right moment for Roger to give her his mark – she really wants it to be right.

“But I don’t want to disappoint you,” Cora says, looking up at me with worried eyes.

Chapter 421 – Bath Time

Ella

“Cora,” I scold, frowning, “you know I don’t feel that way – ”

“Well I know you’d never say it,” she protests, sighing. “But I do get that this union between a wolf and a human that, symbolically, it’s important. And even if you’re not disappointed that it could be...disappointing.”

“I want you to have the mating ceremony you want, Cora,” I reply, steady in my truth here. “Especially in the case of something as important as this.” I give her hand a little squeeze before pulling mine away. “But if you’d like to consider a middle path...maybe you could let me show you what I was thinking?”

She turns her head to look up at me, surprised. “You’ve been...planning?”

“Just a little,” I say, unable to keep the eagerness out of my voice. “Just late at night when Sinclair is asleep and I can’t sleep, or I get up to feed Rafe – ”

“You’ve been losing sleep over this!?”

“No!” I protest, but then I hesitate. “ Well, not much.”

“Ella!”

“Just – can I show you what I was thinking!?” I plead, “sister to sister!?” And then, if you hate it, you can say no.” A wide grin comes to my face then. “But I think you’re going to like it.”

Cora gives a big sigh, leaning back into her seat and closing her eyes. “ Fine, Ella,” she says. “But this is not a yes.”

“I didn’t think it was!” I say, newly excited. Because honestly...it’s gorgeous, and I can’t wait to show her my plans.

When I come sighing into our rooms that evening, Sinclair immediately looks up at me from his casual position on the bed – looking down at his tablet, still doing work, as usual – and immediately laughs.

“What?” I ask, frowning, my baby strapped sleeping to my chest. I put my hands on my hips. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he says, gracefully unfolding his gigantic self and standing up from the bed. Then he slips his hands into his pockets and smirks as he looks me up and down. “I just

didn't realize I was mated to someone who spends their days toiling in the mines, is all."

"What?" I ask again, confused, and Sinclair, laughing, nods towards the bathroom. Both irritated and interested at once, I hurry in and gasp when I see myself in the mirror. "Oh my god," I murmur, leaning in to get a good look at the very real layer of dusty dark brown grime that's covering me from head to foot. "Honestly, why did they let me into the palace looking like this!?"

Sinclair, still laughing, comes to stand behind me. I groan when I see our contrast in the mirror – him the perfect Alpha King, clean-shaved and pressed – and me, a messy ball of dirt with crazy hair –

And then I gasp when my eyes light on little Rafe, who is likewise covered in a light layer of brown dust. "Oh my god!" I exclaim again, immediately beginning to ruffle his hair and moaning as a little puff of dust explodes into the air. "Ohhh, little baby! Mommy's sorry!"

"A little dirt won't hurt him," Sinclair chuckles, reaching out to unstrap the baby from me. "Dirty in those camps, is it?"

"It's bad, Dominic," I murmur, helping him take the baby from my arms. "Honestly, if this is what we look like after just an afternoon, imagine how those people are living..."

"Well, we've diverted a lot of attention to it," he replies, holding the baby away from him a little as he carries him over to his little baby bath. "Hopefully all of the people will be out of those terrible camps and in better situation in a month's time, though of course some cases will take more."

Rafe, waking a little now that he's away from the warmth of my body, starts to cry a little in protest.

"Oh," I say, my heart going out to him. I hesitate, wondering if I should just take him and let him sleep dirty honestly, I can't stand to hear him cry like that –

"Keep going, Ella," Sinclair murmurs, smirking at me and laying the baby down in his bath. "Let him cry a little for once he's the happiest baby in the world, it doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong." Then, as I begin to strip out of my clothes, Sinclair takes off Rafe's little outfit as well, tossing it into the hamper.

"You know," I sigh, watching the little pieces of baby clothing disappear into the basket, "he'll probably be too big to wear those by the time they're clean. He grows like crazy."

"Damn straight he does," Sinclair says, tickling Rafe's naked belly, proud, as he turns on the warm water and prepares to start bathing him. Rafe still fusses unhappily but reaches for his father's finger, wanting to hold it.

My heart breaks with how damn cute it is, seeing them together, before I turn and start the water in the shower for myself. I continue talking to Sinclair as I climb into the hot stream, relishing the feel of it against my tired muscles.

"I talked to Cora about the wedding," I call over my shoulder, starting to shampoo my hair. "I don't think she's into it, Dominic. I'm sorry."

"That's disappointing," he replies. "But yeah, Roger told me pretty much the same thing."

"Are you mad?" I ask, turning to see his reaction, and Sinclair shoots me a little look of disbelief.

"Of course I'm not mad, Ella –"

I laugh a little, shaking my head and turning away to rinse the shampoo from my hair. "That's not what I mean I know that you'd never be mad at them for wanting a different kind of mating ceremony. But...does it mess up your plans at all? For the coronation, and the coronation weekend?"

"It does a little," he calls to me. As I soap my body, I smile to see him taking a washcloth and using it to gently clean the baby, making soft, warm noises to little Rafe as he does. Rafe, tired, lets his father know his protest, but my heart swells with the patience I see in my mate as he washes his baby, explaining softly to him that he's sorry he has to take a bath so late at night, but mommy got him all filthy doing her humanitarian projects –

I laugh when I hear Sinclair's commentary and flick a little water from the shower at him, which makes Sinclair turn to me with a grin.

"Will you be able to fill the time at the coronation?" I ask, soaping up my loofah and beginning to clean my body. "With some other activity, that might convince the humans and the wolves that we're united?"

"Probably," Sinclair says to me, giving Rafe a final rinse. "But...let's see if she can't be persuaded, Ella," he says, reaching for a towel and then lifting the baby out of his tiny tub and wrapping him up and turning to me. "I have a feeling that when Cora sees what you've got planned for her, she's going to be swept away."

I grin at him as I, too, rinse myself off and warp a towel around my body. "How do you know what I've got planned?"

"You're not the only one up late at night," he murmurs, carrying my warm, clean baby over to me. "Sometimes I see what you do."

“And sometimes,” I say, grinning up at him as I take Rafe from him, wanting him close again. Rafe immediately quiets when he’s in my arms again, which pleases me to no end. ”

Sometimes you just snore endlessly, keeping Rafe and I up for hours – ”

“Lies,” he snaps, smiling a little as he takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger and turns my face up to him.

“You like it when I snore. Reminds you that a strong, powerful Alpha is sleeping next to you, ready to rip your enemies to shreds – ”

I bite my lip a little, grinning up at him because...well, honestly, I do like that. I like that quite a bit.

“I’m not sure I need the snoring to remind me of that,” I murmur, stepping closer to him, feeling a little heat build in my core as I stare up into his beautiful, rugged face.

“And what would remind you of that,” he murmurs, his eyes flashing with hunger.

“Oh,” I whisper. “I have an idea. Or two. Or ten.”

Chapter 422 – Wedding prep

Cora

“Ella,” I sigh, turning to my sister, who is standing behind me with her hands clutched together, tears rimming her eyes, not breathing because she’s trying so hard not to burst into tears

“You look so beautiful!” she squeaks, and I can’t help but laugh because she looks like a little cartoon character, standing there, completely undone by the sight of me in a wedding gown.

“Ells!” I laugh, taking a few steps towards her and reaching out my hands. “You can’t do this for every new dress!”

“But you look so differently beautiful in each one!” she shouts, and then a sob breaks from her and she burries her face in her hands, letting loose. I burst into laughter at this, raising my own hands to my cheeks and taking a deep breath.

“I’m sorry! I can’t help it!” she cries and I just shake my head, pulling my hands away and smiling as I turn to look at myself in the mirror.

I mean, she’s not wrong – I look damn good in this sparkling white gown that hugs my body all the way to the floor and then spreads out behind me in a beautiful beaded train. But honestly – Ella is so much more sentimental than me. She has gotten choked up at every single one I’ve tried on so far – and they’re all beautiful but ...I’m just not having the same reaction as she is.

“You don’t like it?” she gasps, scurrying to my side and meeting my eyes in the mirror. “But Cora – you look amazing – you look so romantic-

“I know, Ella!” I say, turning and putting a hand on her shoulder. “But I think the problem is that I’m not I’m not very romantic! You are, for sure, but-”

“Ohhh,” she says, frowning and swatting my hand away, “you are too romantic. You confessed your love for Roger in a rain storm! He swept you off your feet and carried you inside! You – ”

“Okay,” I say, raising my hands as I give in, “I will admit that that part of our story is romantic – ”

“And you conceived your little baby that very night!”

“Okay! I’m a romance novel heroine! You’ve got me!” I laugh, “But Ella! I never craved any of that – I’ve never, ever been the girl who thinks about her wedding day, or what

her first dance would be. This just...means less to me, than it does you."

"But then why do you care if we do it?" she asks, wiping away her tears. "Why don't you just throw you a wedding, if it doesn't matter?"

"Because the mating does matter," I murmur, turning back to smile at myself in the mirror. My wolf raises her sleepy head inside me and gives a little yip of confirmation, making my smile deepen. I run a mental hand over her fur, letting her know not to worry that I'm not giving in.

"Okay," Ella sighs, standing close to me and putting her head on my shoulder as we both stare at me in the mirror. "But you should keep this dress anyway. Roger is going to flip when he sees you in it."

"I know, right?" I murmur, turning and admiring the way the dress hugs my curves.

My sister squeals a little, throwing her arms around my shoulders. "See! You do like it!"

I laugh with her. "I always liked it," I shrug. "I just..."

"I get it," she says, nodding. "But let's keep the dress. Just in case. And... maybe the ballgown too?" She gives me a big grin in the mirror, because I know that one was her favorite, even if this one is mine.

"Whatever you want," I say with a sigh and a shrug. "It's on the Sinclair dime anyway."

"Yeah, let's bankrupt 'em" Ella says, grinning and hopping away from me to move towards one of the poor stylists in the corner who has had to put up with her new queen's hysterics while watching me try on twenty gowns. But while Ella speaks quietly with the stylists, probably purchasing four or five of the gowns just to have options, I turn to shake my head at myself in the mirror.

Because this...this just isn't right.

And suddenly, quite suddenly, I know precisely what I want to do. Before Ella can come back, I slip behind the little dressing screen and take off the dress, folding it carefully and putting on the outfit that I came in. When I come out one of the stylists comes over to take the gown from me.

"Um," I say softly, glancing over at Ella, who is still consulting. "Can you have this one sent to me, at my house? And...not tell her?"

"Uh," the woman says, hesitant, because she knows it's Ella paying not me.

“I promise she won’t be mad,” I say, assuring her. “And if she gives you any heat about it, you can tell her it was me. I promise it will be all right, but...could you please do this? Just between you and me?”

The woman hesitates but then lets out a sharp breath and smiles at me, nodding. “Sure,” she says. “I...I can do that.”

And then, with a new spring in my step and an idea in my head, I go to give my sister a kiss goodbye. Because I’ve got work to do.

Roger exhales with exhaustion when he comes through the door that night. He hangs his head as he presses the door shut and takes a deep breath, clearly transitioning from work to home life and having trouble clearing his mind.

I suddenly feel very, very guilty and take a step back, trying to like...melt into the shadows or something. I don’t know.

But Roger – with his wolf hearing – instantly snaps his head to me.

“Cora?” he asks, cocking his head to the side as he sees me standing in the living room, fully dressed with my shoes on, standing next to two tiny suit cases and a certain white box wrapped in a silver bow. “What...what are you doing?”

“Um...” I say, hesitating and trying to come up with an excuse. Because he’s so tired we don’t have to do this tonight, we can just wait until tomorrow

God, I’m so dumb, I should have texted him before – I should have checked to see if he was up for it –

“Can’t a girl just...stand in her living room?” I finish lamely, tucking my hands behind my back and giving him a too-innocent smile?

“No,” he says, smirking and advancing slowly towards me, his shoulders rolling back like the predator he is. “She can’t, when she’s you, and you’re always tucked up in bed watching Greys Anatomy at this hour. And when you’ve packed two suitcases.”

“Those are just decorative,” I say dismissively, raising my chin but unable to resist smiling too. God, he’s just so good looking. “I’m trying something new. But what I’m getting from you is that it’s not working as a style concept, suitcases in the living room. Notes taken! I’ll fix it in the morning.”

“Cora,” he growls, coming close enough to snatch me by the waist and pull me tight against him. I laugh as he does, loving it-loving him. “What are you doing? What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I murmur, smiling as I look down and place my hands on his chest. “It doesn’t matter – you’re so tired – ”

“Hey,” he says, putting a finger under my chin and lifting my face so he looks into my eyes. “I want to know.”

“Well,” I say, biting my lip and looking up at my gorgeous mate, who I love so, so dearly. And I tap the little bond inside of us, the one that’s just between his heart and mine. And I let him see my love, and my excitement, and that I’m...I’m ready.

I see his face change in a minute as he begins to understand.

“Well, Roger?” I say, grinning up at him. “What would you say if I asked you to elope with me tonight?”

He stares at me for a moment, shocked and thrilled, and then he gives a whoop of happiness as he moves faster than I can see, sweeping my legs out from under me and making me laugh recklessly as he spins me in a circle.

“Hell yes, Cora,” he whispers down to me after we’ve turned three times, his face bright with his smile. “Absolutely. Let’s go. Right now.”

Chapter 423 – Run Away Bride

Cora

As Roger drives down the dark highway, I type out a quick message to Ella on my phone: Hey! I'm going to be MIA for a couple of days. Roger and I are taking some time to ourselves. I'm sorry to leave you hanging with all the work we have to do at the camps will you forgive me?

I bite my lip anxiously when I press send and stare at my phone, waiting for the reply.

"Quit that," Roger says, glancing at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Worrying about it," he says, giving a little shrug. "She's not your boss, Cora."

"Yeah well, Dominic is your boss," I point out, raising my eyebrows. "Did you even text him?"

"Nah," he says, grinning broadly. "I'll let Ella break it to him and just face his wrath when we come back."

"If we come back," I say, sufficiently relaxed by his encouragement and leaning back against my chair. "Who knows. Maybe we'll like eloping so much that we just...stay."

"I encourage this," Roger says, laughing. "Thoroughly. We can probably assume new identities, just completely abandon our lives and our responsibilities."

I laugh at the idea and look at the window, the thrill and excitement of elopement still rushing through me. "Yeah, but then we won't get to see Rafe grow up. And little no-name here won't have his best friend." I run my hand passively over my stomach, sending a little pulse of happy down the bond to the baby so that he can feel my excitement along with me. But he doesn't send anything back – probably asleep. Or whatever.

Who knows, with these magical mystery babies Ella and I have. "About that," Roger says, glancing at me again. "Do you have ideas? For names, for the baby?"

I turn to him, surprised. "Do you know? I actually...don't."

Roger laughs at me, shaking his head. "Let me guess. Ella had her names picked out from childhood, and you never thought about it once."

"Hit the nail on the head, Sinclair," I say, winking at him, making him laugh. "It's almost

like you've met us or something...uncanny."

He laughs again and then we let the moment sit for a while before he speaks again.

"Well, I have some thoughts," he says quietly.

"Really?" I say, sitting up straight and looking at him eagerly. "You have ideas?"

"I'm not stone, Cora," he says, smirking and tossing me a little glare. "I think about our child, and his future, and what I'd prefer to call him. Or not to call him."

"Okay," I say, grinning. "What names are off the list, then?"

"Edgar," he says, immediate, and I burst into laughter.

"Why Edgar?"

"Because," he says, serious. "Any name with 'gar' in it is mean to a little kid. And I knew someone named Edgar growing up and he was...a dick."

I laugh harder at this, agreeing. "All right, Edgar's off the list. What's on it?"

He hesitates for a second and I reach out, shoving his shoulder a little. "Tell me!"

"No," he says, sitting back and putting on his most stubborn expression. "You'll accuse me of being sentimental. I want this to be a discussion, so you have to come up with some too. And then we'll decide together."

"Roger," I say, rolling my eyes but unable to keep myself from smiling at my secretly-sweet mate. "That's the most sentimental idea I've ever heard so much more sentimental than just telling me the names you like."

"Well then give this discussion to me as a mating gift," he says, nodding. "I get to make that request at least, don't I?"

"Oh, sure," I say, sighing happily. "Whatever the groom wants on his wedding day – that's what they say, isn't it?"

He glares at me a little, making me laugh, and then we continue our journey into the night. Roger reaches out and takes my hand as we drive quickly towards the coast, giving my palm a squeeze and passing his excitement to me along the bond.

And I pass it back to him, letting him know that I'm just teasing – and that I'm all worked up about this too, feeling sentimental and excited and thrilled. Even if I haven't been looking forward to this evening for my whole life? I can't wait for it now.

“What do you think?” I whisper as Roger and I step out of the car and look at the tiny little beach cottage sitting before us. It’s lit from within by warm yellow light – I had the owner come and open it up for us so that it would be cozy when we got here. The whole house is probably as big as our living room and kitchen put together, but when I saw it online it was just so adorable that...

Well. I knew it was perfect.

“It’s perfect,” Roger says, turning to grin at me over the roof of the car. I smile right back at him, so pleased that he feels precisely as I do.

Then, without another word, we both spring into action – Roger going to the trunk to get our bags and me moving to the door of the little bungalow with the white box under my arm, punching in the code to unlock it. When Roger joins me at the threshold, I push the door open and we step inside.

“Oh,” I say, my hands going immediately to my mouth as I stare into the prettiest, tiniest little beach house that I’ve ever seen. There’s a little kitchen space off to our left, and a sofa off to the right, but the majority of the house is the bedroom directly ahead.

“Wow,” Roger says, and I look up to see him blinking in surprise. I grin and follow his gaze to the beautiful bed decked out with white linens and beyond it the wall of windows that looks directly out onto the beach, and beyond that, the ocean. “Wow, Cora,” he says again, and I look up to see him smiling down at me.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it,” he murmurs, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Do you know what it reminds me of?”

“Yes,” I say, laughing a little.

He lowers his face to mine, nudging my nose with his, urging me to say it.

“My dreamscape,” I whisper, my face breaking into a big smile. Because even though that bed was directly on the beach with no house or facilities around it...well. We’re corporeal now, and we need a kitchen and a bathroom and a roof.

But everything else? I knew it the moment I saw the pictures. It’s so precisely like I dreamed it would be that you’d think I’d created it myself.

“Come on,” Roger says, leading me into the house so we can have a better look around. He peeks into all the corners his Alpha training of course immediately going into

protection mode, making sure we're safe – as I go directly to the back wall and press the windows open. To my delight, they turn out to be not windows but doors that fold completely open so that the whole wall opens directly onto the beach.

Eager, I press them all back and then lean against the wall, looking out over the sand at the ocean stretching out before us.

A few moments later my mate comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me back against him, lowering his face to my hair and inhaling my scent. I reach one arm up behind me and wrap my hand around the back of his neck, feeling the softness of his skin against my palms, loving the way the short hairs at the base of his head brush against my fingertips.

“So, is it everything you were looking for, Mrs. Sinclair?” he murmurs to me and I smile, a little shiver going through me to hear the name. My name.

“It’s everything I never knew I wanted,” I whisper back, feeling so happy and complete that I can hardly bear it. And then I turn in my mate’s arms, and tilt my head back to look at him, and I smile.

And my mate bends down a little, shifting his arms so that they move from my waist to just below my rear, and then he tightens his arms and stands up straight, taking me with him. I laugh then, running my hands through his hair and kissing him. After a long moment, he pulls back, just half an inch. “To bed?”

But slyly, I shake my head and wiggle. “Put me down. I want to...do something.”

Curious, Roger puts me on the ground and I grab the white box off the bed, grinning. Then, I point to the little iron fireplace next to the bed. “Will you light that?” I ask.

He nods to me, just once, and then watches me as I disappear with the box into the bathroom.

Because I might be a wolf in my soul, but...I want one part of this to be human. So as Roger lights a fire I untie the silver ribbon on the box.

And lift out my wedding dress.

Chapter 424 – The Mark

“Well that’s weird,” I murmur, looking through my phone as my mate sits shirtless beside me, finishing up the last of his paperwork before bed.

“What’s weird,” he asks, though I can tell he’s only half paying attention. But I frown, looking at the message from Cora. “Cora says she’s going away with Roger for a few days.”

“What?” he asks, his head swiveling to me, his voice instantly more alert. Then he snatches his own phone off the bedside table. “That can’t be right,” he says, flicking through his messages. Roger didn’t say anything to me.”

“Well, whatever,” I say, giving a little shrug. “They can take some time for themselves –

“Ella,” Sinclair sighs, and I look over at him in surprise. “We’re planning a coronation and trying to run a country. I’m depending on him to be here!”

I frown at him and shake my head a little. “Don’t be so unromantic, Dominic,” I scold. “They’re in love, they’re going to have a baby. Plus, Cora looked amazing in the wedding dresses today – I think I’m going to be able to talk her into that wedding. If they do that for us, why wouldn’t we let them have a few days away?”

“Did she say that she was going to do it?” he asks, raising his eyebrows at me.

“Nope!” I say, smiling as I start to type a reply on my phone. “She said to forget about it.”

“What!?”

“Don’t stress,” I say, laughing and glancing at him again. “I know her! I think she’s gonna say yes. We should move forward with the plans.”

Sinclair just groans and shakes his head, typing his own message out probably to his brother. I concentrate on my own.

That’s fine, Cora! Take whatever time you need. Don’t worry about the camps Isabel, Hank, and I can hold it down. Will fill you in whenever you get back xoxo.

That done, I look quickly over at the baby to make sure that he’s still sleeping – and I smile to see that he is before curling up next to my mate, resting my head against his chest and giving him a little kiss there as he finishes his message to Roger and presses send.

“Did you yell at him?” I ask.

“Yup,” he replies before tossing his phone aside and wrapping his arm around me. “Okay well don’t yell at Cora,” I murmur, getting sleepy. “That’s my job.”

“You got it,” he replies.

We’re silent for a long moment before Sinclair clears his throat. I open my eyes, surprised, before looking up at him. “What is it?” I ask. Because I know him – I know that he’s exhausted, and that we both need to catch what sleep we can.

So, if Sinclair is clearing his throat, wanting to talk about one last thing before bed?

Something’s up.

“Ella...” he says, hesitating. “I want you to trust me when I tell you what I have to say.” I sit up fully now, frowning down at him.

“Tell me,” I demand, getting suddenly anxious. “Right now.”

“Come back down here,” he says, pulling at my shoulder. But I just shake my head at him, frowning, my anxiety getting worse.

“Not until you tell me.”

“Ella,” he says, his voice low with warning.

“Dominic!”

He just glares at me for a long moment before he realizes that I’m not going to give in, and then he closes his eyes for a second, steeling himself. “Ella, we got word from the Atalaxians today. They...they want to send a delegation to the coronation.”

“What!?” I gasp, appalled.

“All the other neighboring nations are coming,” he says quickly, “sending a delegation if not their royals themselves. It would be an incredible insult not to invite the Atalaxians as well.”

“Wait,” I say, putting out a finger to stop him. “Am I hearing you right? Not only are they coming, but you invited those bigots!? Into our HOME!?”

“Ella,” he growls, snapping his eyes open and swiping at my finger, knocking it away.

“We had to extend the invitation – it would have been such an obvious act of aggression if we didn’t – ”

I scoff, thinking that perhaps the Atalaxians need a little aggression in their lives, and start to move away from Sinclair, kicking away the blankets. But before I can get far, I hear him snarl and then feel him wrap his arm around my waist and tug me, hard, back to him.

I let out a little yelp of surprise as Sinclair levers himself over me, swiftly gathering both of my wrists in one of his hands and lifting them over my head before using his body to pin me to the mattress.

“What!” I gasp, and then I frown up at him, angry. “What are you doing!? Get off of me, Dominic!”

“Not a chance, little queen,” he murmurs, glaring down at me, a little darkness in his eyes. “I’m starting to think that you need a little reminder of who is the Alpha in this relationship, and the King in this nation,” he says, firm.

I glare up at him, wriggling a little beneath him, but he holds firm. “I’m allowed to have my opinions!” I snap, starting to get pissed. “I don’t have to agree with everything you say and do!”

“You do not have to agree with it,” he growls, bringing his face close to mine. “But you do have to support it, little mate. We need to present a united front.”

I open my mouth to protest but he silences me with a look. Bitter, I close my mouth.

“There,” he says, slow, satisfied. “I listen to you, Ella,” he continues softly. “I appreciate your input, but this is serious. I cannot have you second- guessing my decisions. I am doing what I know right for both of us – for our family. And you need to trust me.”

I clench my jaw as I stare up at him for a second, but then something in me gives. I turn my attention to my wolf then, seeing her pressing herself close to the ground even as a little grumble rolls in her chest – because even if she doesn’t like it, she respects our mate’s dominance.

And she trusts him. Trusts that he will fight for us, and care for us, and never make a decision that will put us in jeopardy.

And as I see her submit, I know that it’s right. I lift my chin, staring directly into my mate’s eyes, letting him feel my submission down the bond even as my face tells him that I’m not happy about it.

Just the corner of Sinclair’s mouth pulls into a tiny smile as he lowers his face and brushes his lips briefly against mine. And then he takes his other hand, the one not pinning my wrists above my head, and runs it down the length of my flank, dipping down

to grip my ass in his palm.

“See? When you do as I say...there are rewards.”

I can't help it then when my eyes flutter shut when I feel him squeeze my ass, taking control of my body. My head falls back a little bit, baring my neck to him. Sinclair takes immediate advantage of this, pressing his mouth eagerly to my pulse, licking my skin, letting his teeth rasp sharp against my flesh. And I moan as he lets his body press closer against me, letting me feel the weight of him pinning me down.

He growls at the sound of me moaning, hungry for it, loving it. And I I love it too – because as stubborn as I can be, there is something so good about it – something perhaps biological about submitting to my Alpha that makes me want to cede him complete control.

“Say it,” he growls, moving his hand slowly up the length of my body, over my breast and across my neck until he takes my face in his hand and turns it towards him so that I can feel his breath against my lips.

“I submit,” I groan, feeling pleasure shudder through me as I feel the length of him straining against the fabric of his underwear, pressing hard and insistent against my entrance. “I trust you, Dominic – I – I know you're doing this for us. For all of us.”

And he growls has assent before slipping his free hand down his own body, pressing his boxer briefs down so that he can free himself. Then, when I'm panting for want of him, he presses himself into me, filling me so completely that a moan breaks from my throat when I feel him slide against all of the aching parts inside of me that want all of him, more of him, all the time.

“Good girl,” he murmurs before pressing his mouth to mine and claiming me – claiming all of me as his before we lose ourselves to each other. And I give myself willingly, trusting him completely, as I know he does me. My Alpha, my mate.

Chapter 425 – Under the Moon

Cora

After I dress, I surprise myself by feeling a little shy as I reach for the door to the bathroom to go back to the tiny bedroom where Roger's waiting for me.

Because, I mean, it's no secret why we're here. And Roger's not stupid – he probably figured out what I was doing when I went into the bathroom with a big white box.

But still – it's always something, isn't it? Anticipating what it might be like when the man you love sees you in your wedding dress for the first time. And as I think it, quite suddenly, I can't wait.

I pull the bathroom door open and step back into the bedroom, my eyes instantly going to Roger, standing by the open doors to the beach, the ocean air lifting his hair lightly in the breeze.

And, as I knew they would be, his eyes are already on me. Because he was waiting. And my face bursts into a grin as his expression goes slack.

I feel it all down the bond, which is open to me right now. His awe, and his pride – his love, his desire, the overwhelming swell of pleasure that comes from seeing how beautiful he thinks I look right now on this night – in this dress

"Cora," he says, the sound of my name rough as it works its way from his tight throat. But it's the only word he can manage, lifting a hand to cover his mouth and shaking his head at me, just staring.

I turn a little so that I'm facing him completely, still smiling so hard my face might start aching if I keep this up for much longer.

"So, you like it?" I ask, twisting a little so that he can see more of the dress, see how the beadwork catches the light of the fire and makes the dress look incandescent in the glowing dark of this little bedroom.

He just stares at me for a moment before a little growl rumbles in his chest, his only answer. And I burst out laughing and cross the room to him, holding my hands out.

Roger takes my hands as I come around the bed, using them to pull me closer so that he can slide his hands over my body, feeling the intricacies of the dress for himself, as well as the contrast it presents to the bare skin of my back, my arms. He lowers his face to mine, kissing me softly as he traces his fingertips down the length of my spine, sending shivers all through me.

Then, slowly, he pulls away and takes a step back. "I don't know what I want I can't pick – do I want you close, so I can keep my hands on you? Or far away, so I can see again how beautiful you look? God, Cora – this dress was made for you – "

I wrinkle my nose and smile up at him, terribly pleased. "I'm glad you like it," I murmur, wrapping my arms around his waist. "I liked it too. Ella made me try on like, a thousand. But this was the one I liked best."

"Well, it's perfect," he sighs. "It's just a shame that I'm going to have to rip it to shreds when I tear it off your body in like, thirty seconds..."

I gasp and pull away, my hands defensively clutching the dress at my chest. "Roger! Don't you dare!"

"I don't know, Cora," he murmurs, shaking his head at me and closing the distance between us again, hungry. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to help it. How did you even get this thing on, anyway? I'm never going to have the patience for like, a thousand tiny pearl buttons – "

"There is one zipper," I say, swatting at him. "And you will respect the dress! It is precious to me! I -"

And then I hesitate, blushing, because I myself now am on the verge of saying something very sentimental.

"What," Roger says, his mouth quirking up as he senses it. "Tell me."

"No," I say, laughing and looking down, shaking my head.

"Cora," he says, a warning and a command in his voice. And, while those don't usually do anything for me I have no real intention of letting Roger be the boss of our lives, like Ella and Sinclair – his gentle fingers under my chin, turning my face up to him, persuade more completely. "Please. I want to know."

"Well," I say, quiet, staring up at my gorgeous mate, "I never had a mom with a wedding dress to hand down to me. And if we ever have a daughter..."

A tiny, strangled little groan escapes his throat then – not of frustration, or of annoyance, or anything like that. But simply because he can't help it, because he, too, is a little undone at the sweetness of the idea.

A daughter, one day, getting married, in a dress like this. And suddenly, as I look up at him, I know that we're both thinking the same thought: that we have so much life ahead of us, and so much joy, and neither of us can wait a single second longer to get started.

Roger takes my face in his hands and he kisses me, slowly, sweetly, but with the full force of his commitment to me, to us, and to our future. It sweeps through me and I press myself close against him, my hands wrapped in the fabric of his shirt, tugging him close.

Roger begins to move backwards then, slowly guiding me to the bed, but as I realize the direction of his intentions I pull away, glancing towards the doors.

“No?” he asks, a little confused.

“Um,” I say, realizing a conviction that I didn’t know I had within me until this very moment. And then I look back up into his eyes. “I think we have to go outside for this.”

“What?” he asks, confused. “Cora, there’s nothing that says – ”

“No,” I say, shaking my head, utterly convinced. “Please – I...I’m sure of it.”

And then he laughs a little, not really understanding but not caring much. He gives a quick shrug and then turns to the bed, yanking the duvet off the top and wrapping it into a ball. Then, he passes it to me. Confused, I take it, but as soon as I do Roger dips down, wrapping one arm around my back and using the other to scoop me up beneath my knees, lifting me up into his arms in one swift motion.

I’m laughing too now, enjoying every minute of it, and I nod towards the beach, and the sea, and the sky – knowing, for some reason, that we have to do this out there.

“All right, little demigoddess,” Roger murmurs, his lips close to my ear now. “Under your mother’s moonlight, as you will it.” And then he carries me out into the sand, which as he says well-lit by the full moon above. is

“Oh,” I say, looking up into the sky. ” Do you think that’s it? Because something is... calling me, if that’s the right way to say it. Not even a tug, just an instinct.”

“I think mating ceremonies happened under the moon a lot in years past,” he says, stopping when we’re surrounded by sand on all sides, much closer now to the sea than to the little house, which shines like a happy beacon in the distance. “But, considering who your mom is...I think maybe she wants to see it.”

I smile at him as he puts me down on my feet, my toes singing a bit to touch the sand. I love the beach – always have.

“Well, that’s very romantic,” I say, looking up at the moon. “Plus, we need a witness.”

“Nah,” Roger says, shaking his head and taking the blanket from my hands, shaking it

out and spreading it out in a crisp rectangle on the sand. "Mating ceremonies – they don't need witnesses, unless you want them. They speak for themselves. Once you have my mark it is...just known, I guess."

A little shiver runs through me at the thought of it, my wolf beginning to pant eagerly in anticipation. She's been wanting this for a long time, I know, and frustrated me for continuing to put it off.

But...I was right. Because this moment? It's so perfect that I wouldn't have wanted his mark in any other place, any other time, any other way.

Roger holds out a hand to me, and I smile and take it, and then we step forward onto the blanket, moving to the center.

And then, to my surprise, Roger goes to his knees. I don't ask questions though, instead simply following suit, turning so that I face him, our hands loosely clasped between us, our knees touching.

I smile up at my mate, who looks so incredibly gorgeous in the moonlight, with the night air blowing between us. And he smiles right back at me, shaking his head a little in wonder. Then he sets his shoulders, his face turning serious.

"I take you, Cora," he says, his voice low and soft. "As my love and my mate, for the rest of our lives and whatever comes next. I promise you the protection of my body and the warmth of my spirit. I will hold you close on dark nights and bright days. I love you, quite simply, forever. I am yours and you are mine."

Something burns warm in me at that, a bright and golden thing wrapping itself around that bond that already exists between us – his promise, made true, strengthening it.

Roger smiles at me, gentle. "Your turn," he whispers.

Chapter 426 – Cora’s Promise

Cora

I smile up at my mate, but I shake my head a little bit, not...not knowing what to do next. “Do I...,” I say, laughing a little, “just say what you said?”

“You can,” he replies, shrugging one shoulder and smiling back at me. I can feel his happiness vibrating down our bond. “Or, you can say what you want. There are no wrong answers, Cora.”

“Okay,” I say softly, and then I take a moment to consider, sitting up straight and squaring my shoulders.

“I take you, Roger,” I say softly, gazing into his perfect face. “Even though...I never expected you. I take you because you challenge me, and you hold space for me, and because...” I hesitate now, trying to find words for it. But he waits, patient, listening.

“Because you make me feel like the world is a rich and wonderful place worth exploring. And I want to do that I want to see it all, experience it all, at your side. I love you, Roger,” I continue, my eyes starting to line with tears, “because you make me brave.” My voice starts to crack now with my emotion, and he falters a bit, leaning forward, taking my cheek in his palm. I laugh a little, leaning into it but I shake my head, because I’m not finished.

“So, I promise to love you through all of it – through our whole lives, and whatever comes. But with you? I have... just so much faith that it will all be good. I love you, Roger – I am yours, and you are mine, and I think – I think it’s been that way for a long time. It just took us a little longer to figure out.”

He laughs then, and nods to me, and I feel that same golden warmth again, doubled this time, as my own promise wraps around our bond and becomes true, real, solid.

I can feel it now, singing between us, our fated mating bond ringing with our very real acceptance of it. And now the only thing that’s left is the mark.

My wolf turns an eager circle in me, lifting her face to the sky with a deep and eager howl. And Roger’s – I can feel his wolf prowl forward.

He claims me then, my mate reaching across the distance between us like he can’t wait a moment longer to have his body against me. Roger pulls me to him, his arms around me in the instant that his mouth meets mine, kissing me with a rough determination that I very much want, and need.

I again fist my hands in his shirt, turning to pull him on top of me as I lay myself down on

the blanket, chills running all through my body as my mouth opens fully to him, as his tongue dips in to press against mine

Roger's hands are intent now, one pressing me close to him as his breath sharpens, the other sliding to the center of my dress at the back, finding the top of the zipper and dragging it slowly down. His mouth follows the direction of his hand, moving from my lips to my jaw, my neck, and then further down as he presses the wedding gown down away from my body so that it settles on my hips.

"Come back," I breathe, panting, wanting him again, and my mate complies, bringing his face back to mine and kissing me again as his hand pushes the dress further. I lift my hips, allowing it to slide completely off, to rest in a heap at the edge of the blanket.

A little frantic now with wanting him, my hands shake as they work at the buttons of his shirt. But he just growls and takes his face from mine for a second, tugging the shirt up over his shoulders and tossing it away.

The wind picks up around us, the breeze stiffening as my mate pulls me against the warm skin of his chest, his hand drifting down the naked expanse of my back to take a firm grip on my ass. He groans then, his head turning away almost as if he can't help it, his whole body clenching with want.

My hands move again, almost of their own accord as Roger brings his mouth again to my neck, his teeth bared now, running over my skin in a way that makes me shudder, hard – because I know – I know how badly he wants to sink those teeth in there, just there now-

I fumble at his belt, at the button at the top of his pants, but I'm so distracted-

"Fuck, Cora," he breathes, and suddenly I'm surprised to feel myself lifted, twisting against him as he sits flat on his ass with my knees on either side of his hips, my stomach pressed almost against his face as he moves one hand to his clothing, hastily breaking the button and the zipper of his pants as he forces them down. Roger turns his face to look up at me as he kicks the pants off, shaking his head a little. "Please," he begs, desperate, "I can't – I can't wait any longer – "

I breathe his name and bring my mouth again to his as I let my body slide down against him, as I feel him position the hard mass of himself at the apex of my thighs and then, slow, insistent, press inside of me as I lower myself down onto him.

I moan, hard, into Roger's mouth as I feel him fill me – as I feel my inner walls stretch against him, squeezing him, wanting him. My eyes press shut as my back curves unbidden, as my hips begin to pulse against him.

Roger's own groan as he slowly seats himself fully in me has me shuddering with the pleasure of it, with how perfectly he fits me, with how – how deep he goes-

Roger begins to pulse with me now, each steady thrust of his hips sending his hard cock deeper, pressing against that building intensity within me.

Roger goes slow, indulging, letting it build in me as the minutes pass. And then, when I know that I'm close, and I can feel him shaking beneath me, wanting his release as much as I want mine, I moan, my whole body shuddering now as I concentrate everything on that point, on him my mate. I lean myself forward, tucking my head next to his, baring my throat to him.

"There, little mate," he growls, wrapping his fingers in the hair at the base of my neck and pulling – not harshly, but no, not gentle so that my neck and shoulder stretch open before him. He presses a kiss there as our hips continue to work together, bringing me closer closer

And then he licks the spot between my shoulder and neck, the place of his intent and I moan, and shudder, my whole body starting to shake as I –

As I come so close, as I start to want it to badly I could scream –

"Ask me for it," he murmurs, pressing his sharp teeth just to the edge of my flesh.

"Please," I beg, hardly able to form the words – "give me your mark, Roger I want it -"

Another low growl as he thrusts, hard, up into me and then, a moment later, sinks his teeth into my skin. Everything, everything seems to explode within me – around me.

The air whips around us suddenly and the earth – I swear it shifts and shakes in time with the sharp gasp and the steady moans that pulse from me.

It intensifies, the shaking below us, the wind around us, as I feel Roger's body go rigid and clench as he finds his own end

And there's pain too, mixing with it, sharpening the waves of bliss and satisfaction that run through me, a sharp and salty edge that intensifies the pleasure as my head falls back, as I feel the warm rush of Roger's seed spreading inside of me –

As I feel his teeth lift from his bite, his mark-

And then the gentle press of his tongue against it, tenderly licking the blood that swells there. He holds me then, tight, for a few long moments as the wind dies down around us, catching his own ragged breath as I continue to shake and shudder against him.

As he comes back to himself, Roger begins to murmur soft things to me, pressing me against him and slowly laying backwards, turning his body so that mine comes to rest against the blanket, his stomach and chest pressed tight to mine

And I honestly don't know when I realize that I'm crying – sobbing, a little, with the intensity of it – with the joy, and the pleasure, and the completeness that I feel

“Cora,” he murmurs, his face close to mine, stroking my hair. “Are you are you all right?”

And I open my eyes, confused

And then laugh because – because his face is so worried “I'm fine, Roger,” I murmur, pulling him close and kissing him about a dozen times – “it was just really intense – well, you were there – ”

“It was incredible,” he murmurs against my lips, but then he pulls away again. “Does it are you hurt?”

I bite my lip a little, twisting to try to look at it but I can't quite see he marked me high, closer to my neck. than my shoulder – “it does hurt,” I say, telling him the truth. “But – not in a bad way, if that makes sense.”

He murmurs something in affirmation, the rumbling pleasure in his chest letting me know he understands as he nuzzles his face against mine.

I let my body collapse a bit now, exhausted after everything – after all of it – and Roger lays himself half on top of me, his head tucked close to mine. I kiss his forehead, catching my breath, and then turn my face up to the sky, opening my eyes.

And then, utterly shocked, I gasp.

Chapter 427 – A Mating Gift

“What?” Roger asks, going suddenly rigid and raising his head, his alpha instincts probably anticipating an attack of some kind “No,” I say, gaping up at the sky. ” Roger, look -”

And he turns to follow my gaze, his own mouth falling open as he sees. What looks like a thousand shooting stars cross the sky in a blink, one after the other, chasing each other across the blackness above the sea.

“Oh my god,” he murmurs, his head falling back as he stares upwards. Instinctually, I close the slight distance between us so that my body is pressed seamlessly against his, and I take his hand, and we both stare.

His body, like mine, is still thrumming with the joy of it – of the promises, the s3x, the marking, all of it – but this – the awe we both feel We’re both silent for a long time as we stare up at the sky, marveling.

“Cora,” Roger says after a long moment, turning his head to me a little but unable to tear his eyes away from the meteors that flash across the sky. ” Did you...do this?”

“What?” I ask, shocked.

“I mean,” he says slowly, “I’m pretty sure that you did the wind, and the earthquake –

“The what?” I gasp.

He turns to me for real now, a wide smile breaking out on his face as his eyes meet mine. “I mean, I know I’m good Cora, but you had to have noticed-

“An earthquake?”

“The ground shook, Cora! What did you think it was?”

“I thought it was just a – a little shake! Not an earthquake.”

“Well, yes, just a little one,” he replies, still laughing, giving me a tiny shrug. “I mean, I don’t think you levelled any cities – though, I mean, I can try harder next time – ”

It’s my turn to growl now, smacking him on the chest. “You don’t get to take credit for my gift, mate – ”

“I mean,” he growls, turning towards me and grabbing me by the waist, pulling me flush against him again, stomach to stomach, “I get some credit

I laugh again, kissing him, joy rippling through me as he kisses me back. But then he pulls away a bit, staring into my eyes for a long moment before glancing up at the sky again. "But seriously," he says, "do you think you did it?"

"I honestly don't know," I say, looking up again at the sky, where the meteors continue to streak, leaving behind their long tails of golden light. They're slower now, more patient, less a frantic rush of stars. Now they seem to take their time, wanting to put on a show. "I mean...that," I say, pointing up to them, "sort of matches how I feel. So," I shrug, "... maybe."

"Wind, rain, hail...now earthquake and meteor?" He raises his eyebrows, impressed, and I grin to see it. "Nobody'd better piss you off, Cora," he says, considering. "Or we'll get an asteroid and another species-ending event, like the dinosaurs."

"Yeah," I say, giving him a playful shove. "So, keep that in mind, sir."

He laughs, turning to me again and nudging his nose against mine. "Oh, I intend to piss you off every day," he murmurs, grinning. "I like taking you to bed when you're angry."

I snap my teeth at him then, making him laugh, inviting it. Because honestly, he doesn't piss me off – not really.

Roger not everyone gets him, but with me he walks a very fine line of teasing, bringing me right to the edge of my limits but never pushing too far. And me? Too-serious me? I need that in my life.

And he's right. It makes us great in bed.

"All right, little mate," I murmur, laughing and turning my head away so he can study his handywork on my neck. "What's it look like? Did you do good, or did you mess up and give me a sloppy mark?"

"Hmm," he says, raising his head to study it. "Nah, it's real pretty Cora. You'll like it. And I put it high, where everyone can see -"

I laugh at him then, spinning my head back, grinning. "Jealous," I accuse, narrowing my eyes playfully at him.

"Mmm, yes," he murmurs, dipping his head now to press a kiss to my collar bone. "I want everyone to know you're mine. Can you just start wearing a t-shirt that says 'hands off?'"

"Oh sure," I say, laughing harder now. "I'm sure that will go over really well with the humans we're trying to convince that we truly believe human and wolf kind are equals – for the only human in our little wolf family to start walking around in a t-shirt that says '

Property of Roger Sinclair.”

“Ohhh, I like this new wording,” he says, sitting up a little and grinning down at me. “I can get you one for each day of the week -”

I’m laughing harder now, shaking my head at him. “Only if you wear a matching one,” I reply, “pink, ‘ Property of Cora,’ emblazoned on the front and the back.”

“It would be helpful, honestly,” he says, his voice full of mischief as he brings his face again close to mine. “I already have to beat the women off with a stick – this will cut my job in half -”

I shriek then, smacking at him with my hand, “you shut up! You so do not have to turn women away – ”

“I do!” he insists, laughing harder now. “Seriously, every five minutes! Sorry, I’m a mated man sincere apologies, I know, it is a loss for womankind, to have a specimen like me off the dating market – ”

I growl then, even as I laugh, grabbing him tight and pulling him against me, letting my nails sink a bit into his skin. “You’re a liar,” I murmur, bringing my lips to his, “but if you push it, I really will make you wear the shirt. Because you’re mine, Roger Sinclair. And I’m not sharing.”

“Good, Cora Sinclair,” he murmurs before he kisses me, a long and sweeping kiss. “And neither am I.”

“Good,” I reply, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, relaxing, bliss still running through me – deep and true.

Just then, I feel...a curious little tapping along my second bond and burst into a smile. Roger laughs again, glancing down towards my belly, and I know that he feels it too.

“Baby’s up,” I murmur.

“Probably the earthquake,” he replies, “hard to sleep through.”

I laugh again and send my own little feeling along the bond to the baby. Happy? Happy! Comes the response, making us both laugh.

“I wonder if this means that he’ll be a happy kid,” Roger murmurs, smiling with a deep content that I also feel, “or if he just...doesn’t have a very wide emotional range.”

“He’s just like, a tiny little thing right now!” I protest, putting a hand on my stomach. “He’s

like, the size of a marble. He doesn't have room for any emotions beside happy. And it's not even like he knows the word – he's just telling us he's content."

"Well let's see what else we can make him do," Roger says, shifting himself lower so that his face is closer to my belly now.

I laugh at him, shaking my head but playing along. "He's not a Labrador, Roger," I murmur, "he doesn't do tricks." But my mate ignores me.

"Baby," he says, pitching his voice loud, which makes me laugh harder, because I know that this isn't how it works. The baby – he probably won't be able to hear anything outside my body until much further along in the pregnancy. But still, Roger is making me laugh, so I indulge him.

"Baby," Roger says, sending me a happy little glance, "I'm going to say some names, and I want you to tell me which one you like."

Giggling, I wait, but no response comes.

"I don't think he wants to play," I say, grinning down at my mate.

"Sure he does," Roger says, grinning up at me and then focusing on my stomach again. "Baby, what do you think of Edgar?"

We both wait, but nothing happens. I reach out my hand and Roger gives me his, his eyes still on my belly.

"Let's try it this way," I murmur. And then I close my eyes, and send the word along the bond, so that the baby and Roger can both hear it. Edgar?

There's a long pause...and nothing.

"Knew the kid had taste," Roger murmurs, proud.

"Okay, well, try one you actually like," I urge.

"Are you going to do it too?" he says, flashing his eyes up to me.

"I will," I say, squeezing his hand. "I promise. But mine are really good, so I'll give you first try so you feel like you had some say in it."

Roger laughs and then dips his head to kiss my stomach before passing another name along the line.

Chapter 428 – Names

Cora

Matthew? Roger tries, passing the name down the line to the baby and I grip his hand, and we both wait...

But nothing.

"The baby doesn't like the name Matthew," I whisper, laughing a little. "Well, it was just a starter," Roger murmurs, grinning at me again. "You try one."

"All right," I say, leaning my head back and taking a deep breath. And then I pass a name down, trying... Oliver.

"Oliver!?" Roger bursts out in disgust and I gasp, glaring at him.

"You are biasing our son!" I accuse, sitting up to smack him. "I said nothing when you said stupid Matthew!"

"Matty is a cute name" he protests, laughing and blocking my blow. "Oliver is the name of a sickly Victorian child who wants more gruel -"

I growl and lay back, taking a deep breath and gathering myself. "Well, let's see what the baby thinks," I murmur, sending Roger another glare. And then I try again, whispering Oliver? down the bond. But nothing comes back.

"Good baby," Roger murmurs, kissing my stomach again and making me laugh. "Don't let her call you that. It's terrible."

"Okay okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "Let's try one more."

"I'll pick it?" Roger asks.

"Sure," I reply, relaxing. "But this time, pick one you really, really like. One that you'd actually want him to be called – your favorite."

"Okay," he murmurs.

And then Roger passes another name down the bond, and I smile, because...

Because I love it.

And we wait...

And then both Roger and I gasp at the same time as we feel the baby respond.

Happy!

“Oh my god,” I say, laughing and sitting up as Roger snatches me to him, pulling me fast into his lap.

“Did we did we just -” he stares at me, thrilled. Laughing, elated, I take his face in my hands and kiss him, and kiss him, and kiss him.

Because...I think we just named the baby.

Roger and I stayed on that beach almost until the sun came up, and then we gathered up all of our sandy clothes and the blanket and trooped back to the house, where we closed the doors and slept for hours and ignored the whole world.

We woke up in the early afternoon to the owner of the bungalow tapping on the door, bringing us a basket of food so we could eat something, and Roger went to get it while I curled further up in bed, deciding that I was never, ever getting up.

Of course, I had to, eventually, because Roger wouldn't let me eat all my meals in bed, instead insisting that I come and sit with him on the couch for the elaborate dinner he made. Well, elaborate for Roger, who never learned to cook. But the spread of sandwiches and warmed soup and crackers he made was delicious, and certainly hit the spot.

We spent two more days like that, surviving on whatever the landlord brought us every day in baskets and otherwise laying in bed talking, making each other laugh, sending messages to the baby when he was awake to see what he'd do. And honestly, the baby never did much, but it made us laugh to do it.

And sex, obviously a great deal of that as well. But honestly, it blurred in with everything else we did, a usual part of the day as we napped, and went swim and laid out in the sun. The entire time it was just...so natural, and so easy. Just Roger and I simply together, away from the world.

And it was wonderful. But after the second day, we knew we had to get back – because as much as we like each other, we like our lives too.

“We'll do this again, yes?” Roger murmurs, pulling me close outside the little bungalow after we've packed and locked up. “Next week?”

I laugh and let him kiss me, let it sweep through me. “Maybe not next week. But soon.”

He nods, giving me another little peck, before looking around. "I really like this place. Maybe the owner will let us buy it," Roger murmurs, looking fondly at the bungalow.

"That's sweet, baby," I sigh, but then I put a hand on my stomach. "But, considering that this little guy is coming along? We're going to want more space."

"True" Roger says, his eyebrows raising. "And considering what the goddess said that night on the boat?..."

I break into a grin. "You're thinking more?"

"I'm thinking a bunch more," he nods, eager. "And I'm going to enjoy the process very much, Cora –"

"Oh, sure," I say, laughing and rolling my eyes, shoving him away a little bit. "You just make the babies, I'll grow them, and carry them, and then raise them"

He laughs, wrapping an arm around my shoulder as we head for the car. "Nah, I'm going to be a very involved dad. You'll see. You'll barely have to lift a finger."

"Good," I say, standing on my toes to kiss his cheek as he opens my car door for me. "Or, we can just pass them all off on Ella," I say, giving a shrug.

"She'd be into that?" Roger asks, loading our tiny luggage into the trunk before crossing to the driver's side.

"It would be her dream," I say, rolling my eyes and sitting down in the car, closing my door behind me as Roger climbs into his seat. "Ella, loaded up with four of her own kids and as many nieces and nephews as we can pass over to her to raise? She'd be in heaven."

"Sounds like a deal," he says, half serious and grinning at me as he buckles his belt and starts the car.

"I know," I say, smiling down at him and stroking my belly fondly. "We're lucky. We've got a good family."

"Good family," he agrees, "and only getting bigger and better." And then Roger kisses me on the cheek before we pull away from our cozy little dream bungalow and head home. As we pull closer to the city, though, I grimace a little, glancing between Roger and my phone.

"What is it?" he asks, noticing even my subtle movements.

“Um!” I reply, grimacing a little. “Have you...checked your phone at all? In the past two days?”

“No,” he says, frowning at me. “I knew that Dominic was just going to swamp me with a bunch of stuff I don’t want to think about, and that Ella would text you if anything bad happened. Why?”

I laugh a little, raising my eyebrows at him. “Well, apparently he’s pissed,” I say, grinning.

“Oh god,” Roger sighs, digging his phone out of the center console of the car where he apparently left it for the entire time we were gone. He hands it to me so I can assess while he drives, but when I tap the screen and press the buttons, nothing happens.

“You let it die!?” I ask, appalled.

“Well, it’s not like we can’t resuscitate it,” he murmurs, gesturing towards the chord coiled neatly in the little well beneath the dashboard. Laughing, I grab the chord and plug it in, waiting until the phone comes on. When it does, my eyes go wide.

“Ohhhh boy,” I say, flicking through the messages.

“That bad?” he asks, grimacing.

“Well, I think you should reroute the GPS,” I murmur, flicking through the dozens of messages. “Nothing like truly horrible happened or anything but ...yeah. He wants to see you. Now.”

“Well,” Roger sighs, glancing at me and switching lanes so that we can head to the palace instead of the house. “It was nice being mated to you, Cora.”

“Three days of bliss,” I say, pressing my lips together and pretending to be sad as I pat his knee.

“Remember me to the child,” he murmurs, taking the exit. “Tell him I was a good man.”

“Don’t make me lie to the baby, Roger,” I sigh, tucking his phone away and picking up mine so that I can text Ella and tell her we’re on our way. “I’ll tell him you were adequate, at best.”

Roger just laughs, as I knew he would, and takes my hand, giving it a little squeeze.

Chapter 429 – Breaking the News

I shriek when I hear the tap on the door, jumping up from the bed and dashing towards it, so excited to see my sister that I can't even think about moving slowly.

Behind me, I hear Sinclair stand up and give a little growl. Without even looking, I know he's standing with his arms across his chest, his feet wide apart, glaring at the door. But! That's Roger's problem. Not mine.

I fling the door open and immediately throw myself into my sister's arms. "Cora!" I shout, laughing. "I missed you!"

"It was two days, Ella!" she laughs, shaking her head and hugging me back.

"Three!" I insist, frowning at her.

"Well, whatever," she says, rolling my eyes. "We've spent longer apart than that."

"Yes well," I say, pulling back and grinning at her. "I missed you. Don't go away again. It was boring without you."

"I can't believe that," Cora says, frowning at me as we move into the room. "Didn't you go to the camps and work? That's never –"

But I gasp, my hands flying to my mouth as soon as I see it.

Cora, surprised, turns to me with wide eyes and then starts to look around for whatever is wrong as Roger comes into the room as well, shutting the door behind him. Figuring it out first, Roger starts to laugh.

"What!?" Cora asks, looks between her mate and me.

"Cora!" I gasp, stepping forward and grabbing at the neck of her shirt, yanking it back so I can see –

Her mating mark – right there! High on her shoulder, almost on her neck!

"Oh," she says, laughing and blushing a little, reaching up to run her fingers over it and then sending a little glare Roger's way. "Yes, he decided to put it in a very noticeable place, didn't he?"

"Damn right I did," Roger murmurs, ducking down to give me a kiss on the cheek before moving over to Sinclair.

I ignore them – and whatever boy fight is going to immediately ensue as I throw my arms

around my sister, shrieking again with happiness. ”

Cora!” I shout, rocking her back and forth in my arms, “I’m so happy for you! Congratulations! What – what happened! Tell me everything!”

“Wait,” she says, unable to keep from beaming with happiness herself, but she pulls away from me and shakes her head. “You’re – you’re not mad? That we we eloped, instead of doing the wedding you planned!”

“Cora,” I say, my shoulders falling in my disappointment, “I never cared about that – and even if I was disappointed, I’d never let it overshadow my happiness for you! This,” I say, gesturing again towards her mark, “is such a wonderful thing and you two waited so long and were so patient – ”

Unable to help myself, I cry out again and wrap my sister in another hug.

“Well thanks, Ella,” she says, hugging me tightly back. “We’re really happy. It was...a really special couple of days.”

“I want to hear everything,” I say, pulling back. I open my mouth to ask for more details, but we both turn- distracted when we hear Roger and Sinclair raising their voices at each other.

“You should have been here, Roger,” Sinclair says, his whole body tense, glaring daggers at his brother.

“You didn’t need me, Dom,” Roger says, throwing out a dismissive hand. ” Cora and I needed to do this -”

“Um,” I say, stepping closer to Cora. ” What do you say we steal the baby and go... somewhere else?”

“You don’t want to watch the fireworks?” Cora says, turning her head to the side and grinning at me.

“I want to concentrate on you,” I say, nudging her with my elbow and grinning. “Besides, they need...a minute to work this out. Come on.”

Then, quickly, I cross the room again as quietly as I can, reaching for the baby, who is laying in his pack-and-play, messing with some toys. He gives a little happy squeak when I pick him up, which makes me smile.

I turn to Cora then, nodding to a door on this side of the room. Frowning, because she’s never been through it before, she follows me with curiosity. I watch her face as I open

the door and we pass through. I'm gratified when I see her expression move from curiosity to wonder as we enter a perfect little living room.

"Oh," she says, looking around with raised eyebrows. "Oh wow, I had no idea this was here..."

"We just had it fixed up," I say, closing the door behind me. "Damon's taste was..." I grimace and shake my head. "But through here!" I continue, walking to the center of the room and pointing towards another door, "there are more bedrooms, for the kids! So, we have like, our own little family suite here, which I think is really nice."

"I love it!" Cora says, laughing and sinking down onto the sofa, curling up her legs beneath her in a way that makes me smile, because she looks so cozy, and that's precisely what I want. I know that we live in a palace and that there's a sense of refinement to the entire place, but I really wanted to create a space within it where my family and I could feel comfortable, at home.

And Cora's immediate reaction, curling up against the pillows? It confirms that I did well in my design.

"So," I say, turning Rafe around so he can see his auntie as I sit down on the couch myself. "Tell me everything!"

She does, then. Well, I can tell that she skips over some details that are more personal – just between her and Roger but my eyes predictably well up as soon as she starts telling me about how they went onto the beach, and the promises they made to each other, and the meteor shower.

"Oh geeze, Ells," Cora says, laughing and shaking her head at me. "I'm going to stop telling you about my life if all it does is make you cry."

"You'd better not," I cry out, sniffing hard and wiping my face with the heel of my hand.

"Here," Cora says, sighing and leaning forward to take the baby from me so that I can blow my nose and pull myself together. I smile as I watch her settle the baby on her lap, grinning down at him and giving him a little baby talk that makes him laugh and reach for her.

I bite my lip, loving the sight of Cora with the baby, and then I lean against the pillows, not asking for him back. Not just yet.

"So, is that all?" I ask, curious, my eyes all dried up. "The whole story?"

"Umm," she says, looking away.

“What!” I laugh, kicking out a foot to shove her on the knee. “Tell me!”

“You’re just going to go to pieces, Ells,” she says, rolling her eyes and hugging Rafe close against her.

“Well, that just makes me want to know more,” I say, laughing and leaning forward eagerly.

“Okay, well,” she says, grinning – and I know she can’t wait to tell me either. “We...kind of named the baby.”

I gasp, a long and deep inhale of breath as I sit up straight, clasping my hands to my chest. “You did!?”

Laughing, Cora nods. “I remembered what you said about...how you named Rafe? How you tried out different names, and he really responded when you said Rafe?”

My eyes instantly fill with tears at the memory and dart to my son, my little baby. And I laugh, and nod, “he kicked,” I say, biting my lip. “And he did it again and again when we repeated it.”

“Well,” she says, giving a little shrug. “We were playing with the bond, and the baby kept telling us he was happy, and so we tried...asking him names. And he didn’t like Matthew or Oliver – ”

I wrinkle my nose now, because I don’t really like either of them myself – they’re not bad names, just not for this baby

“But he did like...”

And then she grins a little wickedly at me as I hold my breath, waiting, desperate to know – “...the name we picked out.”

“Cora!” I shout, leaning forward to smack her hard on the leg, making her shriek and then laugh as she holds Rafe tight in her arms. “You’d better tell me right now!”

I raise my hand to smack her again and as I do the door to the room opens, Roger and Sinclair coming in, their eyebrows raised. They both flinch as my hand lands on Cora’s thigh with a satisfying smack, making her laugh harder and kick her leg at me again. Even Rafe gets in on it, laughing a little in Cora’s arms.

“Um, if you could please stop abusing my mate,” Roger says, putting a hand out and stepping forward.

“Dominic!” I protest, looking desperately towards my mate, who smiles around the room. “They named the baby and she won’t tell me what it is!”

Sinclair laughs and raises his eyebrows at Cora. “That’s cold, Cora,” he says, “you know that baby names are her catnip. This is gonna kill her.”

“Yeah well,” Cora says, grinning as Roger moves to sit on the rolled arm of the couch behind her, putting a steady hand on her shoulder. “I figure if I hold out, she’ll give me something shiny as a bribe.”

“You can have my crown!” I cry, meaning it. “Just tell me!”

“Ella,” Sinclair scolds, coming to the couch, where she scoots forward so he can sit behind her and she can lean back against him. “Not even yours to give.”

“Which is why we can get it back,” I hiss, glancing at him over my shoulder. Cora and Roger laugh at us then, but they keep their lips sealed.

“We just want to have it between the three of us, just for a little bit,” Roger says, smiling down at his mate, and a rushing warm feeling runs through me when I see him looking at her like that with all the love in his heart plain on his face.

“Actually,” Cora says, glancing at me with teasing eyes. “I think I’ll tell Rafe. He should be the first to know his bestie’s name, after all.”

My mouth falls open in protest as Cora leans forward and whispers something in Rafe’s little tiny ear. To my surprise, he seems to listen to the word, and then he bursts into a smile looking up at Cora.

“That’s right!” Cora says, laughing and grinning down at her nephew, “that’s your cousin’s name!”

“Come back to mommy, baby,” I murmur, reaching for my baby and taking him back before leaning against Sinclair again, who wraps his arms around me in moral support. “Tell me auntie’s secret, right now!”

Rafe looks up at me with his big innocent green eyes, a bubble on his lip. And I can’t do anything but laugh.

Chapter 430 – Plans in Motion

Ella

“So you two,” Cora says, flicking her gaze between Roger and Sinclair, “you’re all right now? After fifteen minutes, it’s all cleared up?”

Sinclair shrugs. “We kept it pretty cut and dry. He’s on probation.”

“No, I’m not,” Roger murmurs, dismissive, shaking his head to Cora.

“He is,” Sinclair growls. Roger just leans down, pretending to whisper in Cora’s ear but speaking loud enough for all of us to hear, “probation doesn’t mean anything. But it made him happy to slap a word on the lack of consequences.”

Cora laughs, her face turned up to her mate, and I bite my lip to stifle my own giggle, wanting to be loyal to Sinclair, who just sighs behind me.

“Either way,” Sinclair says, moving on. “Congratulations, Cora,” he says, his focus on her now and his voice sincere. “I’m very happy for you – for both of you. It’s a big event.”

“Thank you, Dominic,” Cora says, smiling at him softly and turning her head to the side, clearly touched. I beam at my sister as well. It’s not that I’ve let her off the hook for keeping the baby name a secret when I want to know so terribly badly – but? Well. I’ll bug her about it later.

“We are sorry though,” Cora says, reaching up to take Roger’s hand. “I know that...the wedding meant a lot to you, and that it was going to do good things for the nation. But...” she bites her lip, hesitating, and I can tell that she feels selfish. I open my mouth to protest against this but she continues before I can start. “But – I needed it to be like this, to be personal. I hope that you’ll forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Cora,” Sinclair murmurs, smiling at her warmly. “I completely understand you’ve done nothing wrong.”

And quite suddenly, something comes to me. “Cora,” I say, turning my head to the side and leaning forward. “Does.. anyone else know? About your mark, or your little personal ceremony, besides us four?”

She frowns at me, confused. “Well, no,” she says quietly. “I mean, neither of us really have social media or anything -”

“Or any friends,” Roger murmurs, a little chagrined, which makes me laugh. They don’t need friends, they have us!

“Well then,” I say, a big smile breaking out on my face. “Would you consider...doing it anyway?”

“What?” Cora asks, confused.

“Well, if no one knows,” I say, my smile growing – because this could work! “Why not just have the wedding/ mating ceremony publicly, like we thought of before?”

“Oh!” she says, surprised, and then she starts to laugh, I think a little inspired by the idea. But then she realizes that she already has her mating mark and her fingers go to it, brushing it

“We could get makeup artists to cover it up,” I suggest with a little shrug. “I’m sure they can do it – they do magical things in the movies.”

“Um,” Cora says, looking up at Roger, who just gives her a simple shrug, clearly communicating that it’s her choice. And then she grins, turning back to me. “Really?” she says, “You think it would work? And – and it would help you?”

“It really would, Cora,” Sinclair says warmly behind me. “I think it’s precisely the message we want to send to both our people and some of our honored guests: that humans are equals in our eyes, that they’re part of our family. But, if you’d rather not – if you’d rather just keep the memory of it to the beach, because it’s special to you

“No,” she says, interrupting with a huge smile on her face. “No, I want to do it – I think...it will be fun!”

“I’m going to mark this side this time,” Roger murmurs, drawing a finger down the opposite side of her throat and shoulder. “See if I like how it looks any better...”

She scowls and swats his hand away. “Enough of you,” she murmurs, though I know she doesn’t mean it. Cora hasn’t had nearly enough of Roger, and I doubt she ever will. I hug my baby close and grin at both of them, so incredibly excited for their life together.

And to throw them a wedding!

Time moves quickly once the four of us have made our plans, and my days and weeks quickly fill with tasks. I wake up early earlier than Sinclair, even to take care of the baby and begin to make my plans. He scolds me for it every morning, telling me I need my sleep or that I should wake him up to help but every morning I brush him off.

Because I feel the same way about him and I’m happy he gets to sleep an extra hour while I take care of things. He needs it.

Sinclair is busier than he's ever been. He reminds me, in some ways, of the cold, brooding, discerning business man I met at the beginning of all of this. In some ways I lost track of that man I fell in love with in all of our odd adventures in Vanara, and in the bunker, and in the RV, and everywhere else.

But now, as our life comes back together to resemble what it looked like before? Steady days, routines, living in our own home (even if it is a palace now)? I see flashes of him come back. And it's not that he's lost the sides of him that he's shown to me over the past months but...well, he's just more complex now, isn't he?

And, if at all possible, I love him even more than I ever have.

Sinclair made his formal claim for the throne a few days ago, and no one contested it. Now all that's left is for the governors to ratify the claim, and the packs to demonstrate their support by paying fealty at the coronation. It's all gone smoothly, as Sinclair predicted it would, and so we've moved forward with the plans. Delegations from all the neighboring countries are set to begin arriving in our beautiful Moon Valley over the course of the next few days.

Of course, I'm most excited about the delegation from Vanara including King Gabriel – but I'm also very curious to meet our other neighbors.

But the thing I'm most worried about predictably is that the Atalaxians have indeed signaled their intent to attend, and they're bringing a large delegation.

I do my best to spend a little time every day with Sarah and Jessica, usually in the evenings, bringing Rafe with me to chat and play. They're thriving now, and I think that they're happy and excited about the future that they're building for themselves but...

Well, I haven't had the heart to tell them that Xander is in Atalaxia, and that they're sending a delegation. It's not that I'm keeping it from them – if they asked, I'd tell them in a minute, of course. But they're safe here, and moving forward, and I don't want Sarah to have to worry about the past unless she absolutely has to.

So, I keep putting it off, and she keeps not asking so...we're at a happy little stalemate, I suppose.

"What do you think the Atalaxians be like?" I ask Sinclair one night, laying naked with my belly pressed to his, a little sweaty and still catching my breath after our evening activities.

"Really, Ella?" he murmurs, tracing a lazy hand down my back. "I do my best work, and you want to ask about the Atalaxian delegation?"

I giggle a little and rest my chin on his chest, looking up at him. "If you wanted to keep me from asking complicated questions, Dominic, you shouldn't have gone and become King, making me a Queen. Should have just stayed a businessman and lived in our old house, kept me locked away in the bedroom as your happy little mate – "

He growls, sliding his hands down my body to grip two firm handfuls of my ass. "Don't tempt me, trouble," he murmurs, and I bite my lip as I feel warmth pool at my core, again. "But you're right," he sighs, using his grip on me to pull me upwards so that my face is even with his, so that I can dip my head and press teasing kisses to his mouth. "You're a Queen now, and these are good questions."

"So?" I murmur, each of my kisses getting longer and longer. I can't help it. "What do you think?"

"I think they'll be strict," he says, giving me a healthy smack on the ass to illustrate his point, making me flinch and then laugh.

"And?"

"And distant. They'll want to seem neutral on everything, even though they're decidedly not."

"The women too?" I ask, curious, dropping my head further to trail kisses down the length of his jaw as Sinclair's hands idly explore my body.

"They won't bring any women," he murmurs, which makes me sit up in surprise.

"What?" I ask, a little shocked. Sinclair opens his eyes, a little hazy with desire, and blinks up at me. "This isn't new news, Ella – the Atalaxians don't understand women as equal citizens. They won't see them as useful participants in a party of ambassadors."

"But even...their wives? Their daughters?"

He sighs, raising a hand to my face and stroking gently at my cheek. "

Their wives and daughters are those they will seek to protect most. And by protect, yes, I mean isolate. They wouldn't even think of bringing their women out of their homes, let alone allowing them to see the rest of the world."

My mouth drops open in horror and surprise.

"I know, darling," he says, shaking his head as he looks up at me. "It's horrible. But...it's their nation and their customs. We have no control over it."

I sigh then, laying back down on top of my mate and resting my head against his warm chest. "This is going to be difficult for me, Dominic," I murmur.

"I know, sweetheart," he sighs, wrapping his arms tight around me, letting me know that he understands and takes my side. "For me as well. We'll get through it together."

I nod, understanding, believing him but suddenly my earlier jokes about being happily locked away in his bedroom aren't as funny as they were before.

Chapter 431 – Arrival of Old Friends

Ella

Cora comes early the day that the festivities begin – if they can be called that. Because while the atmosphere is supposed to be festive, I know that simmering beneath it is a great deal of political tension that my mate is hoping goes just precisely right.

I throw my arms around my sister the moment I open the door to my bedroom, letting her in. “Thank you thank you thank you!” I cry out, the words all mushing together as one.

“Whoa!” Cora says, catching me and laughing, giving me a hug in return. “It’s fine, Ella – honestly, where else would I be on a day like this?”

“I don’t know, sleeping?” I say, looking at her with wide eyes. “Its 4 am!”

“True,” she says, giving a little shrug and grinning at me. But then she slips a hand to her belly. “Not like I wasn’t up anyway, though.”

“What?” I gasp, tugging her into the room. Cora is about two full months pregnant now, which isn’t much according to a human pregnancy, but if this is a wolf pregnancy? Then she’s probably just getting into her second trimester.

But...is this her second trimester? With a hybrid baby...

She laughs at me, watching me try to do the math in my head as I stare down at her belly, which is juuuust barely starting to swell.

Which is so, so cute

“Yeah,” she says, giving a little shrug. “The morning sickness is starting to hit hard. I got away with it in my first trimester but,” she sighs. “It mostly hits at night for me too. So, I was already up.”

“Poor sister,” I murmur, looking up into her face and meaning every word of it. I reach for her then, wanting to put a hand on her cheek, but she laughs and pushes it away, which makes me laugh as well. Cora isn’t one for coddling or pity.

“What can I get you?” I ask, the smile returning to my face. “I’ve heard ginger tea does good things?”

“Distraction,” she says, nodding firmly. “That will be the best.”

“Well distraction I’ve got,” I say, grabbing her hand and leading her towards my gigantic closet.

She gasps a little when she steps inside because even though it's 4 am? It's already chaos – clothes and supplies everywhere. Even a little cart with coffee, tea, and breakfast snacks.

“Oh, hey, Cora,” Sinclair says, turning and grinning at her as he stands at the mirror, tying his tie for the fourth time. He wants to get it absolutely, perfectly correct. “Thanks for coming early. We’ve got a long day. Did Roger come too?”

“No,” she sighs, sitting down in the poufy arm chair next to Rafe’s littleplay pen, smiling down at him and patting his head to say hello. “He is lazy, and wanted more sleep. He says he’ll be here at the more reasonable hour of seven.”

“That’s too late,” Sinclair murmurs, shaking his head and reaching for his phone. “I need him here by six...”

“Good luck,” Cora murmurs, accepting the little cup of tea that I hand her.

“It’ll be fine,” I say with a sigh. “Boys are lucky – they have so much less to do on mornings like this. Just throw on a suit! Run a hand through your hair! Gorgeous, ready to go!”

“Oh, come on, Ella,” Cora laughs, sipping at her tea, grinning when she detects that I’ve given her something with ginger in it anyway. “Like it’s so hard for you to get gorgeous.”

“She has a point!” Sinclair calls out, tossing his phone back onto a side table after he finishes texting Roger and turning back to his tie.

“Oh, you both flatter,” I murmur, giving them both a pleased little glare and flapping my hands at them. “But we’ve got appointments, Cora – hair, nails, the works. It’s going to be a lot.”

“I’m kind of looking forward to it,” she says, giving me a smile. “I haven’t been pampered like this in a long time. Plus, the outfits you’ve picked out for me for this weekend...” she whistles, impressed. “They’re stunning.”

“Well, you’re the bride,” I say, turning and giving her a grin. “You’re supposed to steal the show.”

“On Sunday,” she says, rolling her eyes, “I’m supposed to steal the show. But tonight? And then the coronation tomorrow? That’s supposed to be all you, Ella.”

“Or him!” I say, pointing to the man who is going to be you know crowned King.

"All eyes will be on you, my Queen," Sinclair says, coming my side and tugging me close, pressing a kiss to my cheek. I smile when I note that his tie is indeed perfect. "Or," Sinclair continues, considering and turning to the baby. "On Rafe."

"He is very cute," I say, likewise turning my eyes to the baby, who burbles in the playpen, swatting at some toys hanging above him.

Cora laughs at us, taking a sip of her tea. "Guys, he's very cute, but...you're looking at him with parents' eyes. I'm sure people will be much more focused on the two of you."

"Not when they see his outfits," I say, bursting into a smile. And I dash over to the little dresser where we keep Rafe's things, but before I can pull anything out another knock comes at the door to the room.

"Your first appointment," Sinclair murmurs, moving away from me to answer the door. "Ready?"

"As we'll ever be!" I sigh, turning to give Cora a wink. "Let's get started."

"Gabriel!" I laugh, throwing my arms around the King of Vanara as soon as he mounts the four short steps up to the dais on which Sinclair and I stand, greeting each of the delegations as they arrive.

He laughs, catching me in his arms and giving me a warm, lingering hug.

"Ella," he murmurs, his voice low and pleased. "It is such a joy to see you we were all so worried when you left. It is a joy to see you again, healthy and happy."

"And the baby!" I say, laughing and pulling away, reaching to take Rafe from Cora's arms in a hurry so my son can meet the King who was so kind to me during such a large part of my pregnancy. Cora smiles, handing him over willingly, Roger at her side likewise looking eagerly at the Vanaran delegation, which holds so many familiar faces. Henry declined to attend this part of the ceremony, citing long hours and boredom, though he'll be at the dinner tonight.

"Oh my goodness," Gabriel says, laughing and taking Rafe from my hands and cradling him in his arms, staring down at him with true joy. Then he laughs, lifting his head to Sinclair at my side, his eyes crinkling with pleasure at the edges. "Well," he says, reaching for my mate and giving him a warm hug around the shoulders. "No need to guess who this child's father is. He's the image of you, Dom."

"Ah, he's got some of his mother in there," Sinclair says, returning his old friend's warm hug.

“Lies,” I sigh, reaching to take the baby back and snuggling him close to me. “He’s all Dominic, and it’s taking its toll on my poor arms,” I murmur, hefting Rafe up. Everyone laughs at my joke, because they can see it’s plainly true Rafe is a big baby for his nearly- four-month age; he’s already wearing six-month clothes, sometimes eight.

But he’s also adorable, so I forgive him.

Rafe’s tired, I know, but he’s being so good. And frankly, I want him here by my side through all of this. Not everyone in this room is our friend, and I can’t bear the thought of leaving him alone even with any of the nannies who we’ve hired even though I’ve gotten very close with several of them. I started out as a nanny, after all they’re some of the people in my new life who I’ve grown closest to.

Gabriel and Sinclair move slightly to the side, exchanging more warm greetings and giving me a chance to greet several of our old friends, including James, Isabel, and sweet Sadie, who have been separated for at least a month while James went back to Vanara to serve as our ambassador while Isabel and Sadie stayed here so that Isabel could work with me on the camps. We’ve made incredible progress, which has been a delight to me, but we’ve also got quite a bit of work still to do.

I grin when I see Thomas as well, the King’s rather discreet boyfriend, towards the back of the delegation. I give him a happy wave, which he returns with a little bow, and I make a mental note to get to know him much more on this trip than I did the last one.

Our time with the Vanarans goes far too fast but there’s a literal line of people waiting to come and greet us, so we only have about three minutes with each to greet them and make plans and promises to meet up again soon.

Still, it breaks my heart to only be able to spend moments with the people who mean so much to me I find myself a little overwhelmed when they begin to move away, waving and calling their goodbyes.

I’m still waving, Rafe clutched to my side, when I feel Cora step up next to me. I can feel her tension already.

“What is it?” I ask, the smile falling from my face as I look over at my sweet sister. She looks amazing, dressed in a lavender gown with a little cape draped formally over her shoulders. I’m wearing something similar, but all in white, which makes my rose-gold hair shine out like a beacon.

But Cora, even though she’s beautiful, is clearly worried. Serious, she raises her chin at the delegation that’s coming next and I turn towards them, surprised to see each of the members dressed in serious black clothing, standing in four straight lines of five people each. They look more like a military formation than a delegation of ambassadors.

And I note suddenly that they're...all men.

"Are you ready for this?" Cora asks, quiet. I shift Rafe to my other side and reach out to grab her hand. "I guess we have to be."

Then, Cora and I take a deep breath, moving forward to greet the Atalaxians.

Chapter 432 – The Delegation

Sinclair steps close to my other side so that Rafe is between us. My hand still holds Cora's on my left as Roger steps to her side. Together, I realize, we present quite a united front: the Alpha King and his demigoddess Queen standing with their much-coveted child and heir. And then, next us, the Duke and Duchess, likewise a brilliant alpha and a magical goddess-born half-human hybrid wolf.

I find myself smirking a little at the thought of all of our magnificent formal titles when I know the truth: that we're honestly just four people desperately grateful that we've been lucky enough to find each other and build a family.

But still, facing this delegation? I'm a little glad that we've got some intimidating credentials to speak for us. Brave little mate, Sinclair says to me down the bond, making my smirk deepen. I'm glad you're letting them see that you're not scared of them.

Oh, I'm scared of them, I pass back, not bothering to look up at him for support. But you're right. There's no reason for them to see it.

He gives me a warm nudge of support as the first line of five Atalaxians step forward and give a bow. The man at the far left of the line steps forward then, beginning to speak. He introduces himself first – the first and most significant member – and then moves on to each new delegate, who bows his heads to us each in turn.

I turn my head a little as this formal introduction progresses, because this is ...odd. I understand that this reception has a rather official quality, but each of the greetings we've given to each delegation before this has been warm and chatty, with people introducing themselves warmly or greeting Sinclair and I as old friends, if they know us.

The Atalaxians? They don't say a word, instead letting their singular speaker do all the work.

Still, I do my best to follow along as Rafe begins to fuss in my arms, not liking something – I don't know what, though. I hold him higher, tighter against me, trying to pass a little calmness down our bond so that he can relax, maybe fall asleep. The baby responds to this, resting his head against my chest a little and settling.

The speaker finishes introducing the first line of delegates, which includes the predictable ambassadors and senators who have been sent to witness the coronation and have discussions about the future connections between our two nations.

However, when the first row clears, moving away and revealing the second row, I'm surprised to hear the speaker introduce a Prince, which makes my eyes raise. Why had he not been included in the first row? Wouldn't he be the highest-ranking delegate?

I study the Prince as he steps forward and gives his bow, though I admit that I do not catch his name, which I kick myself for. I'm a Queen now or about to be. I should be paying attention.

When he raises from his bow I find myself a bit struck by him, if I'm being honest. He's about my age, and tall, with dark hair and a handsome face with eyes such a light blue-violet that they surprise me in his dark-featured face. While he's broad shouldered, he's a great deal slimmer than my own mate, though the power than emanates from him.

I blink, again surprised. He is...not someone to be trifled with. I don't know how I know it, but I do – I'm absolutely sure of it. The prince nods steadily to Sinclair, looking serious but perhaps even a little bored, like he's done this a thousand times. And then turns his eyes to me, but when our eyes meet he goes a bit rigid in the shoulders.

My eyes go wide, surprised at his reaction as he stands straight, staring at me for a long moment. Sinclair reacts instantly, a subtle growl building in his chest as he takes just one step forward.

The Prince comes back to himself in a second, his eyes flicking to Sinclair before he regains his bored composure, nodding to me, and then to Cora, and then to Roger before stepping back in line.

Surprised, confused, I look up at my mate, whose shoulders are stiff with displeasure.

What...what on earth just happened?

That line of delegates is dismissed and Rafe starts to fuss again in my arms, unhappy.

I begin to coo to him, upset that he's upset. Honestly, my sweet baby hardly ever cries, instead letting us know what he needs through little taps and pulses down the bond to which we respond as quickly as we can. It's honestly the best part of being a wolf mother – and an aspect of it I never really considered until Rafe came along.

I look up at Sinclair, worried. "I think I have to take him out," I murmur, glancing down at the baby.

A moment, my mate replies, mind-to-mind, though he reaches out a hand behind me to settle on my back. I need us all here, for this delegation at least. If he cries, he cries. And I nod, understanding and turning back to the crowd.

The third line of Atalaxian delegates disappears, and the fourth moves forward. I watch passively as they each step forward and nod to us. I nod in turn, though I admit that my attention is decidedly focused on my son, who cries in earnest now, unhappy. I hold him tight, bouncing him in my arms, worried and wanting him to feel better.

I send a little curious pulse down the line, which has worked before sometimes he passes me an emotion, or has even given me a brief impression of the thing he wants –

But today, nothing. He's just upset. My eyes are totally focused on the baby, ignoring the final members of the delegation in my maternal concern for my son, when suddenly the speaker's words catch my immediate attention.

"Our final delegate," the speaker says, "is Duke Xander of Moon Valley, who has been given honorary citizenship in Atalaxia for his services as advisor to the King."

My eyes flash up, going wide as they focus on my uncle, the man who tried to steal my son.

Inside me my gift flares hot with rage, channeling something from Cora's that speaks to heat, and burning, and destruction –

She grabs my arm, sensing it, and I can feel her own fear in her grip, but something about it works – she holds me back from reacting at all, giving me a moment to reel myself back in. It was the right choice, I see, as Sinclair immediately steps forward for both of us, glaring down at the Duke.

"You should have asked," he growls, violence in every line of him now, and I can feel him holding himself back from murdering Xander this instant, "about whether this man was welcome upon our nation's soil. Because he is not. This man is a war criminal, and wanted for several crimes in Moon Valley – including the attempted kidnapping of our Prince."

Sinclair takes another step forward, clearly ready to either tear Xander to pieces or take him into custody – I honestly don't know which –

Xander an old, wrinkled man with cruelty in every line of his face – just smirks up at Sinclair, not moving an inch.

But the Atalaxian speaker – a high-ranking senator himself – steps forward then, interceding. "Alpha Sinclair," he says, his word heavy with the acknowledgement that my mate is not yet King, "Duke Xander is a protected member of our delegation an Ambassador. If you harm him or take him into custody, it will be considered an act of war."

Sinclair's growl deepens as he turns violent eyes on the senator now. "And did you think it would not be war already, when you brought him as a member of your delegation? After, surely, you know all he has done to us, to our family?"

“We had hoped,” the senator drawls, a smug look coming to his face, “that you’d be more reasonable than that, Alpha.”

Rage continues to burn hot within me as I stare at the old man before me who looks fixedly at the baby in my arms, and doesn’t bother – not even once to raise his eyes to me.

Rafe wails with displeasure, perhaps feeling my rage and my fear, perhaps... god, I don’t know, perhaps sensing some malevolence from this man as well-

Cora’s hand tightens on my arm and I nod slightly, just once, letting her know that I’m not going to do anything stupid. I feel her hand hesitate, and then loosen, just a little bit.

Sinclair, to my surprise, takes a step back. I snap my gaze up to him because honestly, I was looking forward to seeing this man’s blood on his claws. But then I remember, of course, that he is a King now or at least, close enough.

And damn it, it will be war if we kill Xander now. I settle uncomfortable under the realization that part of the responsibilities of rule mean measuring our vengeance against what is good for our nation.

And so I send Sinclair a little pulse of support as he steps back, even though my wolf scrabbles and claws in me to be let loose, to be allowed to rip his throat out.

Sinclair doesn’t check his glare, or his growl, as Xander steps back into line with the rest of the Atalaxian ranks. And I know that hatred radiates from all of us as the delegation as a whole moves away. I keep my eyes on them, every step.

And I note that the only one who looks back is the violet-eyed prince.

Who looks directly at me.

Chapter 433 – Catharsis

I barely have time to close the door before Sinclair slams me against it, but I don't feel an ounce of pain, No, because I need this just as badly as he does – and I want him, hard, now

Sinclair grabs me low behind my thighs, yanking me up and wrapping my legs around his waist. Eager, already panting, I shove at the fabric of my skirts, getting it out of the way as he moves one hand between us, fumbling at the button of his pants before shoving them down and freeing himself.

Then he returns his hand to me, a single deft move tearing the delicate fabric of my panties, tossing them to the ground-

Sinclair groans, fierce and feral, as he drives his hard, thick cock deep into me in a single powerful thrust. The moan that rips from my own throat matches his. Because I want him – need him as badly as he does me at this moment, after that horrible surprise.

We spent two more hours in that hall holding back our emotions, greeting delegations, doing our best playing happy King and Queen while all along our emotions were roiling inside

And I could feel it, the whole time, our rage, and our panic, and our desire to end that horrible man and to destroy every single one of the damned Atalaxians, who clearly planned this

We passed the emotions back and forth between ourselves down the bond, unable to help it, until we reached this fever pitch.

When it finished – when we were all done greeting delegations – we both know that we needed this – this, and only this, to work out our rage and our frustration somewhere – on each other

Roger and Cora had walked away with us and Cora had been confused when I hastily passed the baby to her – because of course, of course she assumed that the last thing I would want with Xander in the palace is to be away from Rafe for a single moment

But Roger had taken her arm, and tugged her away with him for a moment, letting Sinclair and I hurry ahead, because he could tell that we needed space.

Space for this, to tear each other apart and find each other again always have as we

My back curves with want, with need, my hips pulsing along with each of Sinclair's steady, long thrusts into me. He doesn't hold himself back for a single second, wrapping his fist into the hair at the back of my neck, pulling my head back and exposing my

throat. As he pounds himself into me, venting his pent-up rage, I moan my encouragement to him, telling him to give me more, to go harder.

My mate, ever willing, complies, slamming himself into me again and again. I'm as eager as he is, panting, and when my body begins to come to its crest, as I begin to spill over and over, my whole body clenching against him, holding him tight, Sinclair roars, low and deep. And then he lowers his face to my throat and sinks his fangs deep into my mating mark, sending me again into a deep wave of pleasure that makes me moan and shake around him.

He finds his own end then, spilling himself into me, so thick and heavy, warm and rich that the sensation makes me moan again as I cling to him, panting, the echoes of my completion running through me again and again.

I'm still pressed up against the door with Sinclair leaning hard against me a few moments later when my eyes finally flutter open as I come back to myself. We're both still panting, hard, and I bury my hands in my mate's hair, forcing my breaths to deepen, to come back to myself.

When he feels my breathing change, Sinclair shakes his head a little and pulls it back, looking up into my face. "Ella," he says, shaking his head, his voice thick.

"No," I murmur, sensing the apology on his tongue. I stare into his face, nodding to him, making him see it. "I needed it too. I wanted it, Dominic. Just like that."

He murmurs something unintelligible to me, pulling away from the door and carrying me with him to a nearby chair that he sinks into, taking me with him to settle into his lap. His shoulders still shake, just a little, with the aftershock of everything.

We stay like that for a long few moments before he shakes his head again, clearing it, and looks back up at me, more himself now than he was a few minutes ago when we entered the room.

"Are you all right?" he asks, and then his eyes dip to my neck and shoulder, to the blood there. "Shit..." he murmurs.

I laugh a little and close my eyes for a second, placing a hand over my mark. There's a flare of lavender behind my eyes, but a moment later when I pull my hand away the wound is gone. "I'm fine," I say, smiling at him. "Goddess- born, remember? And like I said – I needed it too."

He looks towards the door to the rest of our suite then, worried. "We should get to Rafe –"

“A minute,” I murmur, turning his face back to me. “Dominic – I know why I needed that. It...it gives me a great deal of comfort, to pass control over to you, to let you take charge of me, and take care of me. But – how are you? Is it enough? Do you feel...are you all right?”

My mate takes a moment to let a growl rumble in his chest, letting me know how deep his pleasure in me is. “Ella,” he murmurs, pulling me deeper into his lap so that he can lower his face over mine, nudging me with his nose. “You are my entire comfort in this world. But yes I was...so angry, and frustrated, and wanted to –

“To kill them all?” I murmur, smiling a little.

“Yes,” he growls before pressing a long and lingering kiss to my mouth. “I shouldn’t have let them get me so riled. But they played their cards precisely right.”

“Well,” I murmur, wiggling against him suggestively, and eliciting a low growl from my mate that makes pleasure streak through me again, “anytime you need to take that ferocious energy out and avoid creating an international incident...you know where to find me.”

His growl deepens as he runs a hand down my body from shoulder to ass, dipping his head to press a kiss to my neck, and then my chest.

“You joke, Ella,” he murmurs, “but... you have no idea how much you steady me. Because that – I mean, some people might not understand, might think I was just taking out my anger on you, but -”

“No,” I say, serious, placing my hands on his cheeks and turning his face up to me. “I understand, Dominic. I feel...precisely the same. I want to be that for you, as you are for me.”

He kisses me then, a different kind of claiming than the one against the door a moment ago, but still just as powerful. Sinclair and I – our physical connection has always been more than just sex. It has always allowed us to come together, to be each other’s refuge.

Today was just...a vivid example of that fact.

A little knock comes at the far door.

“Cora,” I sigh, and then my mate gives a little grumble of assent as I stand up and move towards the door, scooping up my ruined panties on the way and tossing them in a trashcan as my mate, behind me, does up his pants.

Then, I pull open the door to see my wide-eyed sister standing with her mate, who smirks knowingly. Rafe, still unhappy, cries in Cora's arms.

Chapter 434 – Provocation

“Ohhh, Rafey,” I murmur, reaching for my baby boy as Cora and Roger come into the room. “I’m so sorry, mommy and daddy just needed a minute.”

“Yeah,” Roger says, his smirk deepening. “To talk.” I shrug a little and return his smirk, refusing to let him embarrass me as I carry my baby over to his little changing table and gather the supplies I use when I feed him.

“What happened out there,” Cora says, a little breathless as she presses the door shut and looks around at us, wide-eyed. “I mean – is that...okay? For them to just bring a criminal and an enemy back into the nation?”

“It’s not precisely legal,” Sinclair sighs, waving the group of us forward towards our little living room once I’ve got all my supplies gathered. “But it is complicated, and a very... targeted message that they’re giving to us.

That they’re on Xander’s side in this, agreeing with his policies and his lineage, not mine.”

Together, we troop into the living room and I settle onto the couch as I begin to feed the baby, hoping that he gets as much comfort as I will from the familiar routine.

“Are you two all right?” Roger asks, looking between me and Sinclair, who settles on the arm of the couch behind me.

“We’re fine,” my mate growls, and Roger smirks a little but nods as he sits in an armchair across from us. Cora looks a little confused, but shrugs, giving up trying to figure it out and sitting in Roger’s lap, clearly wanting to be close. He wraps his arms around her waist, pulling her back against him.

“All right,” Roger says. “Then what’s our plan on how to retaliate?”

“Unfortunately,” Sinclair sighs, “they’ve played their cards well, bringing Xander here on a diplomatic mission. Because I have to be...perfectly diplomatic this entire weekend, or else I risk not being crowned.”

“Really?” I ask, surprised as I look up at him. “It’s that precarious?”

“These are a King’s duties,” he says, giving a little shrug. “If at the first trial of diplomacy – no matter how large the trial – I rip someone’s throat out? I’d say it’s enough to give any nay-sayers a strong argument for why I should not be the one to lead this nation.”

I sigh, shaking my head and looking down at Rafe, my sweet boy. “So. We have to tolerate him.”

* "I'll send a message to the Atalaxians that Xander is not welcome at any of the more informal events," Sinclair murmurs. "But yes, when they gather as a delegation en masse? There's nothing I can do to prevent him, unless I do want to risk sparking war. Not unless he crosses a line himself."

"Well?" Roger says, tilting his head a little, curious."

Can we...provoke him into doing that?"

"Do we want to?" I ask, grimacing a little. "I mean, obviously I don't know him, but this is a man devious enough to plan to get me pregnant and then steal the child. I don't think he's someone we're going to trick into a faux pau that we can use to kick him out of the palace."

"Ella's right," Sinclair murmurs behind me, and I look up to see him shaking his head and crossing his arms over his broad, muscled chest. Something stirs in me again as I look at him, and Sinclair glances at me, the start of a smile down his lips as he senses my arousal, either through my scent or down the bond

I just shrug a little. I can't help it. He laughs a little.

"What is with you two," Cora murmurs, still confused and looking between us.

Roger just laughs and tugs her closer. "Don't worry about it, Cora," he murmurs, kissing her neck. "I'll explain it all to you later."

She sighs, still confused, but gives in.

"It's unlikely that the Atalaxians are going to do anything to truly provoke war – this was just their gambit, their way of letting us know where they stand.

If we can just...get through the weekend without killing him, they should go away and give us more time to develop a better strategy for getting Xander back and ensuring that he sees justice."

"Do you think they'll let him go?" I ask, curious.

"I don't think that Xander actually means anything special to the Atalaxians," my mate replies, looking seriously down at me. "I'm securely in power now, and everyone knows that Rafe is my son and heir. If he tries to claim the throne through Rafe..." Sinclair shrugs, implying that it's pot going to go well, internationally.

I smile at Sinclair, glad to see that my clear-thinking mate has returned, pleased to have

been able to play a part in that. And I, too, feel so much clearer now after our little... interlude.

“So, he’s a bargaining chip,” Roger says, nodding, understanding. “They know we want him. Now they want to see what they can get.”

“Well,” Cora says, sitting up a bit straighter, her strategic mind at work. I smile at her, thinking that Cora has probably the best mind for these sorts of games of all of us – except, perhaps, for Henry, who I suddenly wish was here. Cora could have been a champion poker player, I think, had she not picked medicine.

“I think,” Cora continues, “that our best move then is to demonstrate to them that their bargaining chip is actually of very little value to us.”

“And perhaps,” Roger chimes in, nodding his agreement, “keeping an eye on him to see if he does make a misstep.”

“And if he does,” Sinclair growls, a sound of vengeance that makes me smile, “we take him.”

I take a deep, contented breath now, smiling around at my family and down at my baby.

“It’s a good plan,” I murmur, nodding my agreement. “

Now..we just have to put it into action.”

Our little family meeting is unfortunately short-lived.

We spend a few more minutes coming up with the details of a plan, but then the knocks start to come at the door – hairdressers and housekeepers, stylists and party planners. Everyone we’ve asked to come and help us get ready for the evening –

Because that formal greeting? That was just the start of the day.

We’ve got dinner and the afterparty to contend with, which I’m sure will present its own challenges.

We all change – Cora and I into more formal gowns, Roger, Sinclair and Rafe into tuxedos. I squeal with delight as I dress Rafe in his, even though he sleeps through most of it. But he just looks so cute that I can’t stop staring at him.

Cora laughs, coming to my side and looking down at my little sleeping baby. “Is it going to be all right to take him with us?” she murmurs. “Does he need more sleep?”

“He’s getting used to being a busy royal baby that naps on the go,” I sigh, lifting him up into my arms.” Besides, Conner is coming,” I say with a grin, “to be Rafe’s bodyguard again. And Rafe’s used to sleeping in his arms after all these weeks at the camps.”

“True,” Cora says, giving a little laugh. “I bet Conne

never thought he’d have that title – Royal body guard’ slash traveling crib.”

I laugh along with her, pleased that the mood has changed so much in the two hours since we left the hall where we greeted all of the delegations. But I feel bolstered now, ready for whatever comes next. And as Sinclair comes to my side, I can see that he, too, is steady.

“Ready for dinner?” my mate asks, running a hand down the back of my sparkling silver gown.

“Ready for war, you mean?” I ask, grinning in reply.

Sinclair laughs, dipping his head to kiss me once and giving me a nod. “Come on, private,” he growls, giving me a light smack on the a*s. “Time to move out.”

Chapter 435 – Dinner Party

Ila

I enter the elaborate dining room at Sinclair's side with Rafe tucked sleeping in my arms. There are no doubts or hesitations on my face and I lift my chin high as I smile slightly, letting people see me as my mate's unbothered Queen, as someone entirely unruffled by the events of this morning.

Sinclair, walking at my side, presents a similar image: the unflappable Alpha King, his body fully capable of every violent rumor of which our guests have heard, but toned and refined by the mind of a King, a true power player.

The effect we have as a pair ripples through the room with people turning to us, many eyes going wide. Because we really do present the image of two people who should not be trifled with.

I have to admit, a little thrill goes through me at the idea of this. Because, honestly, I usually think of myself as sweet and determined, but certainly not powerful and imposing. But tonight, at Sinclair's side? It comes to me easier than I thought it would.

Cora and Roger come into the room behind us, our personal guards following after them. Many eyes turn to my human sister, considering her alongside and her fated Alpha mate. I know Roger and Cora are baffling to many people within the wolf community who can't understand how or why Roger would have a human woman fated to be at his side.

But one look at my stunning sister in her lavender gown? Well. Let's just say that even without the information that she's a demigoddess who can control the weather, I think it's making a lot more sense to a lot of our gathered guests.

Still, as Sinclair and I approach our chairs at the head of the table, I'm aware of some frowns and whispers around the room. Even though the four of us present a strong and untied front, there are as there always are dissenters amongst our supporters. My eyes move immediately to the group of five ambassadors from Atalaxia, dressed in black and gathered at the far end of the table.

Sinclair sent word, of course, that my uncle was absolutely not invited to attend this smaller, more personal dinner, and I am pleased to see that he's not there. But I narrow my eyes in their direction anyway, wondering what the hell else they've got up their sleeve.

"Dominic, Ella," I hear Henry's voice say, and I turn to see him wheeling towards us. My face breaks into a grin and I lean forward, giving him a kiss on the cheek and tilting the baby so that Henry can say hello as Sinclair greets his father as well.

“I’ve heard you’ve had a tough morning,” Henry says quietly as people around the room begin to take their seats. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there – ”

“Please,” Sinclair says, dismissing his apology with a wave. “We handled it well. There’s nothing you could have done.”

“Still,” Henry sighs, rolling up to his place at the table on Sinclair’s left. “I’d have liked to have seen the man for myself, been able to assess him. But I’m sure I’ll have more opportunity for that as the weekend passes.”

“Yes,” I sigh, taking my own seat as Sinclair pulls it out for me. “I’m sure you will.”

I hold my sleeping baby close to me as Cora and Roger take their own seats to my right, and then I look up at Sinclair, who is still standing. A warm smile lights my mate’s face as he lifts a glass of wine towards the waiting group of people and begins to welcome everyone formally to the palace, letting them know that he hopes the weekend will be full of many pleasurable and fruitful conversations about the future of our collected nations.

I smile up at my mate as I listen to him speak, proud of this man who can so seamlessly move between worlds. I’ve seen him in so many different lights now father, mate, soldier, politician, and beyond – and I’m so impressed that he is able to perform each role so admirably. Honestly, my heart tumbles a little over itself as I watch him. I couldn’t have designed a more perfect mate if I tried.

I blush to myself a bit, looking down at my baby, thinking myself the luckiest girl in the world. And then I glance around the table, pleased when I see everyone’s eyes focused on my mate, a variety of expressions crossing their faces most of them warm.

But when my eyes fall on the Atalaxian prince?

I’m shocked to see him looking directly at me. Staring, even.

I blink and sit up straight a little bit, surprised. And my shock only increases when he fails to look away, instead holding my gaze, his face expressionless as he studies me, apparently ignoring the speech and instead trying to figure me out.

I find myself growing more and more uncomfortable under his gaze. What... why on earth would he be so interested in me?

I stare back at him, my own eyes fixed, trying to figure out the mystery

But then I jump a little when the room breaks into applause. I bite my lip then, a little ashamed at having missed the tail end of my mate’s speech. But – well, considering that we went over it together last night, refining all the details, I suppose I already know what

he said.

When Sinclair looks down at me and tilts his glass towards me, I beam up at him, giving my full support. His own smile deepens before he turns back to our crowd of guests, calling for a toast to international friendship and a bright future. Our guests call the words back to him, heartily joining in with the spirit.

I raise my own glass along with everyone else, genuinely hoping that this can be true. But as my eyes again return to the Atalaxian delegation?

I see that while they raise their glasses in a slight show of support, their eyes are cold. And I have a distinct feeling that they're going to make our jobs very difficult.

The rest of the meal goes well, with general chatter and delicious food. I pass Rafe to Conner so that I can manage a knife and fork and I do my best to participate, chatting with the guests closest to me, but as I glance at Cora and find her eyes already on me, I know we're united in our thought: that the real challenge is going to come after dinner, at the after party.

When we finish our desert and the dinner breaks up, I get to my feet feeling newly steeled for the evening ahead.

"You all right?" Sinclair asks as he stands next to me. I can tell immediately that it's less a question of whether I'm handling this well, but instead if I feel prepared for what's coming next.

"I'm perfect," I assure him, giving him a bright smile as Conner brings me Rafe, who is awake now and looking around the room curiously.

"All right, trouble," Sinclair murmurs, leaning down to kiss me on the forehead. "Let's go get this done."

Chapter 436 – Meeting the Prince

Sinclair moves away at Roger's side as Cora comes to mine. We both fuss over the baby for a moment, checking to ensure that he doesn't need anything, but when we're sure that he's ready to go I turn him in my arms so that he can look out at all of the people who have come to visit us on this big weekend.

Cora, Rafe and I head into the room together with Conner close behind us, as planned. We decided to split up on this one always staying in sight of our mates, but giving people the opportunity to come and speak with us privately if they're so inclined.

The strategy works. A great variety of people come and introduce themselves to Cora and I, and I'm pleased to see that the majority of these people are women. I smile a little smugly inside, glad that I was right that the women who attend our coronation as part of these delegations who might feel awkward or shy approaching the gigantic, intimidating Sinclair brothers feel differently about approaching two women, one pregnant and the other holding a baby.

The result, to my pleasure, is a great deal of happy chat. I meet a variety of fascinating women who are all eager to tell me about their lives, their plans for their nations' futures, the collaborations that they're excited to pursue with us. At each turn Cora and I are genuinely enthusiastic, wanting to work with these people to make our world a better place.

"Wow," I say to Cora after we part ways with a dowager Queen and her granddaughter, who is the next in line to her own throne. "It's...incredible. I had no idea that most of these nations and people even existed."

"I know," she murmurs, running a hand over her hair and looking around. "I feel like we need to go back to school, Ella – we're not nearly prepared enough for our positions in this nation. We need some serious history lessons."

"Well, you go to school," I murmur, sighing. "And just give me the wikipedia version of whatever you learn, okay? Because I am done with schooling."

"You were good at school!" Cora protests, a little appalled.

"I was good," I say, looking at her with raised eyebrows, "but I wasn't addicted to it, like you were. Honestly, Cora, you'd still be in school if there were more degrees to get."

"Well," she sighs, putting her hands on her hips for a second and tilting her head to the side for a second. "That's probably true..."

I laugh, smiling at my clever sister, and then Rafe gives a sad little cry. Curious, I look down at him and instantly smell something very unpleasant.

“Oh, geeze,” I murmur, realizing that he needs to be changed. I look anxiously over my shoulder, wondering where the closest bathroom is that has a changing area

Honestly, it’s my house now – I should know this stuff –

“Here,” Cora says, reaching for Rafe. ” Let me.”

“Cora, I can’t -”

“Let me,” she insists, taking Rafe from my arms. “You’re needed here more than I am – go talk with Roger and Sinclair, and Conner and I will take the baby to be changed. All right? It’s going to take a long time and the Queen should be present to...do Queen stuff.”

“All right,” I sigh, though I hate handing my baby off to her for the second time today. Rafe doesn’t seem displeased, though, smiling happily up at his aunting and reaching out his hands for her, trying to grab her cheeks. Cora laughs and sends me a quick wink before turning to Conner and letting him know the plan.

I turn then, looking for my mate, and seeing him across the room speaking with a bunch of Alphas with Henry and Roger by his side – I set off towards him.

I take the long way around, hoping to disappear a bit into the shadows at the sides of the room and avoid anyone in the center of the room pulling me for a chat.

And I almost, almost make it – honestly, I’m about three-fourths of the way there – when someone steps into my path, clearly wishing a word.

I sigh a bit inwardly but take a deep breath, putting on my Queen expression – calm, smiling, interested as I look up to see who desires a moment of my time.

But my smile falters a bit when I realize that it’s...him.

“My Queen,” the Prince of Atalaxia says, giving me a sharp, formal bow. ” It is a pleasure to meet you.”

I go a little still, my smile increasing a little at the irony of this because...

He stands straight and looks at me then, staring at me for a moment, clearly waiting for a response. But I just stand in silence, not knowing what to say. Then, I’m a little shocked to see a smile pull at the corners of his lips.

“Can I take your silence to mean...” he says quietly, “that it is not precisely a pleasure for

you?"

And damn me but...

Something about the way he says it his self-deprecation, the warmth in his voice...

I feel my smile growing.

"I have to say," I reply, a little laugh on my voice now. "That whether or not it is a pleasure to speak with you, highness, is...complicated to say the least."

He bows his head a little, nodding, and I hear him huff a sad little laugh under his breath. "Honestly, I warned them against bringing that man, surprising you all like that -"

"Then why did you do it?" I ask, taking a step forward, wanting to look up into his face –

He raises his eyes to mine again and I'm shocked again by their color and clarity – by the light blue-violet color of them, such a surprise under such a dark head of silky black hair.

"I don't know," he replies, shaking his head and slipping his hands into his pockets as he takes a deep breath. "They spent hours deciding on it on precisely what to do, what to say. I promise – it was a very deliberate choice."

"And were you not privy to those meetings?" I ask, raising an eyebrow at him, wanting to push him for more information.

"I am my father's sixth son, Highness," the prince sighs, shaking his head, again smiling that sad little smile at me. "I am a figurehead at best on this mission, and privy to nothing important. You'll have to forgive me for that. I wish I could tell you more."

I stare at him now, my eyes narrowing a little bit because...honestly, I can't put my finger on it -but something about the way he says that makes me believe him. I believe that if he could tell me more, he honestly would.

He smiles at me again, and I realize that I've been silent for about thirty seconds now. I blink and stand up straighter, a little embarrassed, but he just grins at me an expression that causes a single dimple to curl onto one cheek. Then, he holds out a hand.

"I'm Calvin," he says. "And honestly, your highness, it is...more than a pleasure to meet you. I hope you believe me on that."

Slowly, I reach out, my eyes still on his face, and I reach out my hand to slip it into his, accepting this small gesture of friendship. I open my mouth to introduce myself but –

Before I can

A pulse runs through me when my palm meets his, like the sound of a deep bass note resonating through my chest

It thrums through me, chased by something sharper – lighter – a second pulse, like lightening jumping through me, a spark that runs through my veins

I jump, working to pull my hand away, but before I can his fingers close around my hand, holding it tight.

Any expression – polite, or kind, or happy – falls from his face as he stares at me in shock.

We stand there, palm to palm, for a long, long moment. A moment too long, frankly, until I hear someone clear their throat next to me.

And then I look up into my mate's green eyes, his stern face, with my palm pressed tight in another man's hand. Our enemy's hand.

"Ella," Sinclair says, his eyes flicking to the Prince next to me, "are you...all right?"

"Yes!" I say, suddenly gasping in a deep breath and pulling my hand from Calvin's – honestly, I hadn't realized that I'd stopped breathing –

"Yes, Dominic," I say again, regaining my equanimity and smiling up at him, taking a step closer to his side. "I was just...greeting our guest," I say, gesturing towards the prince.

Sinclair turns his expression to the Prince, his eyes dark.

Chapter 437 – Be Careful, Little Mate

Ella

“I don’t think we’ve met,” Sinclair says, looking Calvin up and down, his voice low and dangerous.

“Not personally, no,” Calvin says, and I watch him, a little surprised to see that he has regained his composure faster than me. He again executes his sharp little bow, showing obeisance to Sinclair, the kind of gesture one Royal gives to another. “I am Prince Calvin, of Atalaxia. And, despite the uncouth gesture that my party made this morning, I hope you will believe me when I say that I am very pleased to be here and eager to build a good relationship between our nations.”

Sinclair raises his eyebrows in surprise, looking for a long moment at the Prince and then down at me, ”

Well,” Sinclair says, his words careful and measured. “It is good to hear you say that. After the events of the morning we were convinced that peace was not a priority for you.”

Clavin sighs and glances over his shoulder, to where the rest of his delegation are speaking quietly with a group of people I don’t know. ” Honestly highness,” he says, his voice low as if he’s seeking not to be overheard, “for many of them? It is not. But I hope that over the next few days I can convince you that you have at least one ally over this border.”

Slowly, Sinclair nods, pulling me closer to his side. “I look forward to being convinced,” my mate says evenly, still studying this strange Prince.

Clavin bows again to both of us, realizing that this interview is over. “A pleasure, your highnesses,” he murmurs, beginning to turn away.

“Ella,” I call – and I surprise myself to hear my name fall from my mouth.

Calvin turns back to us, slow, likewise surprised.

“Please,” I continue, “call me Ella.”

The Prince hesitates for a moment, flicking his eyes to Sinclair, but then he bows to me more deeply than he’s done before. “It will be a pleasure, Ella.”

And then he turns away.

I press myself closer to Sinclair’s side now, a little unnerved.

“What the hell was that,” Sinclair asks, his voice baffled but not at all angry at least not with me. I look up at him, slowly shaking my head. “I honestly don’t know,” I whisper.

But what I cannot deny?

Is that it was...something. Something real, something significant.

And as Sinclair and I find our way to Roger’s side – Cora and Rafe, I smile to see, are already making their way back into the room through the main door – I find my eyes following this strange prince.

Wondering who the hell he is, and what he could possibly want from me.

Sinclair and I go to bed late that night, after hours of chat with delegates from other countries. Honestly, even though all we did was stand around chatting, it feels like I’ve run a marathon.

I settle my sweet baby in his little crib, giving him a kiss on the head before flopping fully-dressed onto my own bed.

My mate laughs at me. “Ella,” he says, shaking his head, “up. Come on. You can’t fall asleep like this.”

“I can do what I want,” I mutter, turning stubbornly away from him. “I’m the Queen.”

Sinclair laughs harder now, coming close and slipping my shoes off my feet, which makes me moan a little with pleasure to feel them released. Sinclair, intuiting how good it feels, sits on the edge of the bed and takes one of my feet in his hands, beginning to massage it.

I moan again, louder this time.

“I like it when you make that noise,” he murmurs, his voice low, hungry. I open an eye and glance at him because honestly, even though I’m exhausted, when my mate talks like that?

Heat already begins to pool in my core.

“I like it when you make me make that noise,” I murmur back.

Growling with pleasure, my mate drops my foot and crawls over me until his body stretches above mine, holding his weight on his elbows to avoid crushing me completely. I take a deep, contented breath and turn onto my back, lifting my hands to pull his tuxedo shirt out of his pants and then slip my palms onto the hot, warm skin beneath.

Sinclair's growl deepens and he lowers himself, taking a deep breath of my scent before pressing determined kisses to my neck, my shoulders, my chest – every one of them sending a new shiver through my body.

"You were wonderful tonight," he murmurs, letting himself fall to the side and pulling me with him so that I'm pressed warm against him, stomach to stomach. "The perfect Queen."

"I was not," I laugh, pressing my hips close to his, wanting to feel him tight against me. "I didn't even know half of the nations that those delegates were from – I'm a sham Queen, very ignorant -"

"No," he murmurs, lifting his head to look at me, ensuring that I see and hear him. "You were perfectly yourself, Ella very charming. No one holds your lack of knowledge against you – they're aware of your story. They love that you're a real person who cares about her people – not some born-and- bred lady who knows how to affect the airs of a Queen and play the game."

"Yes," I say, my hands faltering a little on their path lower. "But doesn't that make me...a bit of a crappy Queen."

"No," he hums, closing his eyes and exhaling deeply when my hands continue their path, slowly unbuckling his belt. "It makes you perfect."

"All right," I laugh softly. "If you say so, Dominic. You know best."

"Damn right," he growls, and I laugh a little more. I get his belt undone and begin to start on the button of his pants but suddenly his hand is there, stopping me.

"What was that," he says, and I look up to see eyes on me now. "Earlier – with the Atalaxian Prince?"

I bite my lip, pulling my hands away. "Are you mad?"

"Why would I be mad?" he asks, frowning, a little concerned.

"Because I was talking to him," I say quietly, "by myself. When we sort of agreed that... we'd give them the cold shoulder, and all talk to them together."

"He cornered you, though, didn't he? Didn't give you a chance?"

"But that's also my fault," I sigh, shaking my head. "I should have just gone with Cora to change Rafe I was stupid, to try to cross the room alone."

“Ella,” Dominic murmurs, taking my chin in his hand and shaking his head at me. “It’s never so serious that you can’t cross a room alone. Honestly, if it was that dangerous I wouldn’t have put you in that situation.”

“But...I was nice to him, when I should have been cold” I say, grimacing a little. “He was hard to be cold to though, he was...nice, and charming, and he...charmed me a bit.”

“Did he?” Sinclair said, curious.

“Yes,” I say honestly, looking up at him. “I was prepared to cut him, to push past and move immediately to your side but – honestly, Dominic, he was really nice to me, and easy to talk to. I felt instantly disarmed.”

Sinclair hums a little, intrigued and a little worried. I stay quiet for a moment, letting him sort through his thoughts, watching his eyes go a little vague as I see him turn things over. When he focuses again on me, I know he’s made a decision.

“He surprised me as well,” Sinclair says, his voice even and considerate. “I didn’t expect one of them to single themselves out, to...suggest that there were divisions in their faction. If it’s a ploy by them, it is...a strange one. Though not unconvincing? I don’t know. I need to talk to my dad about it – see what he thinks.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” I murmur, bringing my hands back to their place on Sinclair’s warm body now, wiggling myself closer.

“But Ella,” Sinclair says, his voice still serious, letting me know he’s not finished. I look up into his eyes again. “Be careful with him, all right? He’s been ...curious about you. I haven’t missed the way he focuses on you. It may also be a tactic a part of their plan. Just... be on your guard and trust your instincts when it comes to this Prince, yes?”

“All right, Dominic,” I murmur, nodding to him. “I promise I will.”

“Good girl,” he growls, wrapping a hand around my back and pulling me tight against him again before using that same hand to begin to work at the zipper that trails down my spine.

“So,” I say pouting a little as I slip my hand down his stomach, into the top of his pants, reaching for him. “I’m not in any trouble?”

Sinclair’s growl deepens as I take the wide, hard mass of him into my hand and begin to slowly stroke.

“Why, little mate,” he rumbles, his voice catching a little, “Did you want to be?”

His hand slips into the open back of my dress now, taking a full handful of my ass into his palm, making my breath come hot and short.

“Well,” I whisper, smiling a little bit as I tilt my face up to his, bringing my mouth close so that I say my next words directly onto his lips. “Maybe just a little bit...”

My mate snarls, a vicious noise that makes me smile, before lifting his hand into the air and delivering a sharp smack right in the place it just left, right on my ass.

The sharp feel of it reverberates through me and I moan louder now but before I can make much noise at all my mate silences me with his mouth over mine.

Chapter 438 – Coronation

Sinclair and I wake up only a few short hours later, our clothing spread out all over the bed and floor all around us, because today is the big day.

I groan a little when I feel Sinclair stir.

“No,” I murmur, wrapping my arm around him and pulling him back down. Or, I should say that he lets me pull him back down. Because there’s no way I’m strong enough to physically make my big scary Alpha do anything he doesn’t want to do.

But he is sweet, and obliges me.

“I know,” he murmurs, cupping my face in his gigantic hand. “I’m sorry, trouble. But we’ve got to get up and look pretty for our big day.”

“Let’s just go ugly,” I sigh. “Really... lower expectations for the rest of your reign. You can rule in sweatpants and t- shirts. They’ll call you the Comfortable King.”

He laughs, and I can feel him shake his head. “Come on, Ella,” he cajoles. “Don’t you want to look pretty to match the crown?”

I crack an eye open, tempted. Because honestly, I forgot about the crown. I’ve been very much looking forward to the crown.

He laughs again, looking down at me. There she is,” he says, smiling at me. “My little magpie. Come on, gorgeous.”

“Fine,” I sigh, sitting up straight with a pout. “But I am having two cups of coffee today, which means that that one-” I say, pointing to the baby, “is going to be all jittery all day.”

“A compromise I think we can accept for one day,” Sinclair says, pulling me close. I turn my face up to him, sensing that he wants it, and Sinclair kisses me long and lingering. As he does he passes feelings to me down the bond pride, and happiness, and a great deal of contentment.

And I pass him back my own feelings much the same, as well as a great deal of hope and pleasure to see him lead this nation for which he’s fought for so long. When Sinclair breaks our kiss, he beams down at me.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, shaking his head at me in wonder. And I smile back. “You’re going to be a wonderful King, Dominic.”

He wraps his arms tight around me, taking a deep breath, simply accepting my faith in him. And I let him hold me tight and warm, pleased to the end of me to see this day

finally begin.

We only let go of each other when Rafe gives a little squeak, wondering why we've let him lay alone in his little crib for so long even though we clearly know he's awake.

Sinclair and I both laugh.

"He wants in on the love," I say happily, crawling away from my mate and getting out of bed to gather my little baby in my arms.

"It's a big day for him too," Sinclair says, likewise getting out of bed and coming over to the two of us, kissing Rafe on the head. "He'll be a Prince, after all, once the day is done."

"Hear that!?" I say to the baby, laughing a little. "Little Prince Rafe! Cutest little heir to the throne that there ever was!"

"True," Sinclair murmurs, dropping a kiss to my head too and then moving towards the bathroom as I take Rafe to his changing table to get him ready for our big day.

The day, as predicted, is...incredibly long.

I starts with a great deal of formality as Sinclair leads me into a room that is a strange mix of auditorium and conference chamber, with the kind of stadium seating all around that looks more like...I don't know, a college lecture hall?

But instead of there being a stage at the front of the room, the seating is on three sides of it, with an elaborate table on the fourth side of the room and a narrow empty space at the center. Sinclair seats himself at the center of elaborate table, with me to his right and his father to his left. I look behind me and grin when I see Cora and Roger come into the room, dressed in the traditional formal clothing of nobility of Moon Valley.

Sinclair and I are likewise formally dressed, with me in a burgundy velvet gown with a matching cape and Sinclair in a sleek black jacket and pants with a blue sash over the front as well as a great number of medals. I don't know what any of the medals mean, but he does look dashing.

Which, honestly, is all that matters to me.

I grin down at little Rafe, who is dressed like his father no medals, though – and he grins up at me, giving a little squeal. I smile at him, laughing. "Are you excited for the big day?" I whisper, giving him a little pulse of curiosity down our bond.

He sends me a happy pulse back, letting me know how he feels. A little thrill goes

through me, as it always does, to be able to communicate so effectively with my son even though he is so young. And he laughs as he looks up at me, almost as if he's happy about it too.

I give him a big hug, pressing a couple of kisses to his soft hair, before I feel Sinclair's warm hand on my back.

"Ready?" he asks, and I beam up at him, giving a single nod.

What happens next takes...hours, and a great deal of patience. But as each of the governors of the distinct provinces of our nation comes forward and affirms Sinclair as their choice for King, I remind myself that this is actually the important thing. The elaborate coronation will come next, but this? Where first the governors and then the individual packs consent to be ruled?

I glance at the smaller cohort of five Atalaxians just visible at the back of the room, knowing that this is not their process: that they rule their people by force and sheer will.

And even as I'm bored to the ends of me over the extent of this hours-long process and have to work every minute keeping the boredom off my face so as not to insult our citizens, I recognize the importance of this, of the people having a say in their ruler, even a King.

Their recognition that this man is the best one to lead us.

So as each governor and pack leader pledges their fealty and support, Sinclair gives a deep nod of recognition, and I follow suit, trying to look them all in the eye to let them know that they're seen, that they're heard, and that we will truly do our best.

Still, as the final delegates come forward, I can't help shifting in my chair just a little bit because...it has been a long time. I look jealously down at the little bassinet by my side where Rafe naps, giving a little sigh through my nose.

Must be nice, to be a little baby prince, sleeping through the biggest day of his life.

But then, finally, it is done, and Sinclair takes my hand and helps me to my feet. And as the people cheer he raises our joined hands in a sign of victory.

Our people have elected, unanimously, to support Sinclair's claim for the throne. There were some who took the opportunity to make their doubts known – which is their right – but overall the support was enthusiastic. And I smile out at our people, incredibly pleased that they see what I see in my mate: a warm, dedicated, powerful man who will be good for this nation for all of us.

Rafe sends me an eager little pulse down the bond, letting me know he's awake and a little afraid of all the noise. I drop my mate's hand to pick up the baby, and the crow cheers anew when they see Rafe in my arms, blinking around at all of them confused.

Sinclair wraps an arm around my shoulders, smiling at both of us. "Ready for what's next?" he asks, eager.

"Yup," I say, grinning up at him. "Time for the crowns!"

Chapter 439 – The Crowd’s Approva

Ella

We move immediately to the grand hall of the palace, where we met our delegates a few nights ago. Sinclair and I wait quietly in a little room off the side of the entrance for everyone from the first room to move to their chairs in the second, where there are already thousands of people waiting. While there was only room in the first chamber for a small selection of our population, the grand hall is much larger.

And it’s packed.

I squeal a little bit with excitement as I peek through a little velvet curtain that covers a window on the door, excited to see so many people gathered to celebrate with us. I lift Rafe so he can see too, but then I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn to see my sister’s beaming face.

“Ella!” she laughs as I squeal and wrap my free arm around her. She wraps her arms tight around me, rocking me back and forth. “I’m so happy for you both,” she murmurs into my shoulder, laughing a little. ” Unanimous! It’s unprecedented!”

“Happy for all of us!” I laugh, pulling back to grin at her a little. Rafe reaches for her, happy, and Cora gives him a kiss and a cuddle, but doesn’t take him from me. Not yet.

I glance behind Cora to see Roger happy at Sinclair’s side, their father with them. They’re speaking with a couple of the Royal aids, who are showing them something on an ipad.

“What is that?” I ask.

“Probably footage from outside,” Cora says, still smiling. “It’s crazy out there, Ella. The streets are filled.”

“Oh,” I say, my expression suddenly falling with worry as I glance towards the door. “Is that...safe?”

“No, the crowds are all really happy,” Cora says, her eyebrows going up. There aren’t a ton of humans, but those who are there are celebrating.” She takes a moment to smile at me softly. ” They’ve done a lot of analysis and polling, Ella, and they say that the humans were largely convinced to support Sinclair’s reign because of you.”

“What?” I ask, confused. I mean – I haven’t even been in the public eye for long –

“Yeah,” she says, nodding eagerly. ” They know that you cleared out the refugee camps and got all of those people help – and they love your story orphan girl, who found her

mate by chance, and didn't even know she was a wolf? And they don't know the details of your divinity or your magic-but there are lots of rumors of your healing going around, and everyone is very excited about what you can do, and the fact that you're using your gift on the most needy populations. You're kind of like...beloved, Ella!"

I blush at this and swat her away. "That's ridiculous, Cora," I murmur. "I'm sure you're exaggerating – it's all for Sinclair –"

"No," she says, serious now. "It's real, Ella. Wolves and humans alike – they love you."

I look at the floor a little, blushing harder – and I find that even as I desperately hope that it's true, I can't really believe it.

Because I mean I want the people to know that I love them and I'm going to help them. But beloved? That just seems-

"Ready?" Sinclair says, coming over and looking between Cora and I. Roger grins at me from beyond my mate.

"Oh, she's ready," Roger laughs, "She's been waiting to get her hands on that crown for weeks now."

"Don't be jealous, Roger," I say, raising my chin at him and pretending to be haughty. "Just because you don't get a crown."

"It's true," he sighs, pretending grief. "I just get a stupid necklace."

"It's a livery collar," Cora sighs, rolling her eyes and moving to his side, looping her arm in his. "If you call it a necklace again I'm going to smack you."

"If we kill them now," Roger says in a false stage whisper, loud enough for us to hear, "we can take it all, Cora!"

Cora and I burst out laughing at this clear joke, but Sinclair just glares at his brother and shoves him on his shoulder. "Don't even think about it, Rog," he growls. "You don't want the work."

"Truth, brother," Roger says, clapping Sinclair cheerfully on the shoulder. "Your life is safe with me."

"Boys?" Henry says, rolling over and looking sternly up at his sons. "If you're done kidding around? We have a coronation to begin."

Both Sinclair and Roger have the decency to look mildly ashamed of themselves,

making Cora and I laugh again.

Sinclair looks down at me, and I nod, letting him know that I'm ready. We rehearsed this all, after all. Sinclair will go first, and then me second, and then Cora will take Rafe and she, Roger, and Henry will go down the long aisle to the front of the room, where the thrones sit. It's all been timed very precisely, and we've got one chance to get it right.

It's televised, after all, and Henry emphasized how important it was for us to let the world see us as dignified, serious people who take our responsibilities with the gravity that they deserve. And I agree with him – as much as our family likes to joke around and tease, I know that in our hearts we're all determined to show the people of our nation the respect they deserve.

So, collectively, we all pull ourselves together.

Sinclair drops a lingering kiss to my lips and then moves to the door, where his aids are waiting to give him any final briefs. I exhale a deep breath and stand behind him, passing Rafe to Cora after giving him a kiss on the cheek. The baby grumbles a little but goes to her and I spread my hands down over my velvet dress, hoping to hell that I'm not all wrinkled and don't have any baby spit-up over my shoulder or anything.

Cora and Roger settle in line behind me with Henry and my pulse begins to speed up as the door before us opens and I hear the crowd roar their approval. Sinclair sends one last smile over his shoulder to me and then moves forward, moving slowly and deliberately into the room to walk down the long aisle to the throne he has claimed with the support of his people.

The aids smile at me, waving me gently forward. I move just to the edge of the door, not letting the people see me yet – as was planned – and, when the count reaches the two-minute mark – meaning that Sinclair has reached the throne – the aids wave at me, signaling me to begin.

Taking a deep breath, I step towards the door, and then through it, and a huge roar bursts out in the room. A blush raises on my cheek as a smile bursts onto my face.

I bite my lip a little – because I know that I'm supposed to be dignified and serious right now, but the way that they're cheering for me –

I can't help it. I raise a hand to my heart, and bow my head a little, completely overwhelmed and humbled by their approval. Contrary to my intent, the cheering only increases. I laugh a little, shaking my head and then begin to walk forward.

But even as the crowd claps and cheers, I hear a noise behind me that makes me turn, just a little bit.

My little baby – Rafe – crying for me.

And my heart breaks as I feel him sending pulses down the bond, looking for me a little afraid of all the noise and being left alone, even though he loves his auntie Cora.

Still, he's looking for me –

And despite the fact that I know I should move forward, that all of this is timed-

I turn back, seeking my son.

Chapter 440 – A King, A Queen

The aids go pale as they see me hurry back to the door, their eyes going wide. This is not protocol

“Ella!” Cora gasps, her eyes moving quickly over me as she bounces Rafe in her arms, trying to calm him. “What are you doing!?”

“He wants me, Cora,” I breathe, hurrying to her side and reaching for my baby. Cora doesn’t hesitate, handing him over to me, even though she rolls her eyes.

“He’s going to be fine!”

“Well, he is now!” I say, already turning back to the door, my baby beginning to calm, though his face is still red and a few tears stand out on his cheeks.

The aids wave to me frantically and I nod to them, mouthing my apologies as I again head through the door and hurry towards the aisle.

The crowd, which had gone quiet in their confusion, suddenly bursts into the loudest cheer yet, a great deal of laughter and joy in their noise now. I laugh along with them as I head down the aisle, shrugging my apology and hoping that they understand. Because as much as I’d love to be their dignified queen?

I’m always going to be a mother first.

There’s a huge smile on my face as the crowd cheers for Rafe and I, as I coo to him and wipe the tears from his face, as I see him look around at everyone in wonder and surprise. He’s not scared anymore not with me holding him. Someone in the crowd shouts his name and I swear he turns when he hears it, making me laugh.

And then when I’m about halfway down the long aisle – I finally glance towards the throne and see my mate standing at the end of the aisle, waiting for us. And my smile deepens as a thrill runs through me from head to foot to see him there, waiting for me. I swear, my feet start to move faster of their own volition, eager to carry me to his side.

And – even though I didn’t mean for them to see it – the crowd loves it, and cheers harder. I laugh at this too, reaching out a hand for Sinclair when I come to the end of the aisle and climb the three short steps up to him.

“I’m sorry,” I say, still laughing as he takes my hand and pulls me to his side. “I tried to be dignified – it didn’t work

“It’s all right, trouble,” he murmurs, kissing my hair. “This was better. It was you.”

I almost purr with happiness then, pressing my face briefly to his chest and letting him hug me before taking a deep breath and standing straight at his side. Because he's right – as much as I thought the people of this nation wanted me to be their dignified queen...

Well. They'll just have to make do with regular old me.

And maybe that's all they really want anyway.

I'm smiling, warm and happy, as I watch my sister and her mate come down the aisle, walking slowly behind Henry, who really does manage to look strong and dignified as he makes his way towards us. When he reaches the end Henry makes a short detour up the little ramp that we had built for him as Cora and Roger come up to stand at our side – Cora next to me, and Roger next to his brother, presenting a united front.

The next bits go as fast as the previous meeting was slow.

The mayor of our fine city – a human – comes forward along with the head of the largest pack – a wolf – to together perform the ceremony. Sinclair and I turn towards them and he goes to one knee, reciting an oath to dedicating his life to protecting this nation and its people.

I smile, watching him make his vow, especially the words that we had changed, which promise explicitly to protect and serve both wolf and human kind together. One that is done the mayor hands Sinclair a scepter that marks his sovereignty, and then the pack leader comes forward to reverently place a crown on his head, declaring him King.

When Sinclair stands, the crowd roars their approval. He faces them all and looks around smiling, nodding deeply to let them know that he accepts his new position with the gravity that it is due. The cheer goes on for a long time and I send Sinclair a little pulse of joy. He turns to me then, taking my hand and beaming his own happiness at me.

It takes a few moments, but when the crowd dies down Sinclair turns towards the throne, accepting from one of the aids another crown from atop a blue velvet pillow.

I find my face settling into serious lines now as I see it, finally, in his hands.

Because while I've joked about wanting to wear this crown and it really is very pretty – I'm well aware that it's not a piece of costume jewelry to be played with. That it is, instead, a very real promise that I'm making to the people of this nation to care for them, and protect them, and fight for them.

And I intend to live the rest of my life making that promise come true. I tilt my chin up to my love, my mate, holding his gaze as he lifts the crown above my head with both of his

hands.

"I crown you, Ella Sinclair," he says, his voice booming through the room. "As my mate and my Queen. You are my whole heart, my conscience, my peace, and my will. You are the greatest joy of my life and the best gift I can give to my people is to have you by my side. Do you accept?"

Slowly, I lower my head and bend my knees, just a little, impulsively pressing a hand again to my heart that I hope shows how much his words have meant to me. And then, as I bow to my King, my mate, and before my people

I feel the crown come to rest on my rose-gold hair.

And the crowd cheers again.

I stand, beaming out at all of the people who shout my name, a few tears coming to my eyes as I realize that their support is genuine – that maybe... maybe they're starting to see how much I love them, and love me back.

Overwhelmed, I wrap an arm around my mate's waist, leaning into him.

"A little more, trouble," he murmurs into my ear, and I look up at him, surprised. Because whenever we've practiced this before that was the end of it. Just a little procession back down the aisle and then the party

"What?" I ask.

"A surprise," he murmurs, and then his face bursts into a grin as he turns away from me. I follow the direction in which he reaches, turning backwards to see-

And I gasp when I see another velvet pillow, and on top of it-

A teeny tiny golden crown, just a little precious circlet unadorned by any jewels, just big enough for a baby's head-

Chapter 441 – A Prince

Ella

I can't help it, not at all. I burst immediately into tears. The crowd, when they realize what's going on and when I think they see my over-emotional reaction to it – begin to again shout their approval. Sinclair laughs when he sees me crying, shaking his head at me as he returns to my side with the little crown in his hands.

"Well, if you didn't want me to cry!" I say, stamping my foot lightly, "you should have told me!"

"Nah," Sinclair says, smiling at me, his voice soft but somehow still audible over the cheers of the crowd. "This is way better. It was worth it to see your face."

"Okay well," I say in a rush, wiping hastily at my cheeks before raising Rafe a little so that he's sitting straight up in my arms, looking up at his father with a happy smile. "Get on with it! I want to see how he looks!"

Sinclair laughs at me, shaking his head, and the crowd quiets, eager to hear what their King will say.

"Rafe Sinclair," my mate says, looking seriously at his son. But Rafe frowns and waves his hands at him, confused by the seriousness of his voice, which makes Sinclair instantly laugh and have to start over.

The crowd laughs along with us, pleased, I think, to see their serious King look so human, to see how much he loves his son.

"Rafe Sinclair," my mate tries again, his voice lighter this time, and Rafe lets out a little squeal of joy that threatens to make me cry again. Sinclair grins, leaning over a little. "I crown you as my Prince and my heir, to ascend to this throne when it is your time to rule. I promise to raise you to understand this responsibility, to grow to be a good man, and to deserve it."

And then, when I think my heart will burst with love, Sinclair gently places the little crown on Rafe's tiny head.

I watch eagerly to see what Rafe will do and then I burst into laughter when he reaches his pudgy hands up touching it experimentally, trying to get a grip on it so he can pull it off.

But I move his little hand away and the crowd again bursts into cheers, charmed – I know – by their little Prince, who deserves every moment of their adoration.

I step close to Sinclair, turning my head up to him, and he bends a little and kisses me, warm and real and true. I lose myself to the kiss, loving him so much I can hardly bear it, and I have no idea, really, if the crowd cheers to see us because I'm lost in him.

The next thing I know Sinclair has his arm wrapped around my shoulders, and he's leading me back down the aisle, and we're waving to our people.

Before I know it, we have left all the people behind, and we're back in the private little room at the front of the great hall, and Henry and Cora and Roger come in smiling and laughing behind us.

But I have no eyes for them – instead, I can only look up at my mate, my Alpha, my King, my love for him shining and beaming down our bond.

"I love you, little Queen," he murmurs, an arm around my waist pulling me close, Rafe snuggled between us. Sinclair uses his other hand to tilt my chin up towards him. "You look just as good in that crown as I thought you would."

"Wait till you see me later," I murmur, feeling a mischievous.

"Later?" he asks, quirking an eyebrow at me.

"I believe," I say quietly, wanting to keep it between us, "that I promised to show you what I look like in nothing but this crown."

A growl reverberates in his chest, and my King lowers his head, and he kisses me. And I stand on my toes and kiss him right back.

The party that night is a big one. The guest list isn't completely open the majority of our citizens are celebrating out on the street – but there are certainly hundreds of people here.

Everyone from each of the foreign delegations were invited to celebrate with us, along with many of our most honored citizens.

I admit that I'm nearly overwhelmed by all of the guests and the attention. Sinclair and I spend hours turning to each new person who comes forward to greet us, to congratulate us, to shake our hands and tell us about their excitement for the future of the nation. I do my best to give each of them my full attention and to match their enthusiasm.

The result, of course, is that after three hours of the party I'm totally exhausted. But the ballroom is still packed with people, and our job isn't nearly done, so I squeeze Sinclair's hand, and kiss Rafe's head, and turn to the next person who claims our attention.

“Hey!” A familiar voice shouts, and my face bursts into a grin as I turn to see little Benny from the human refugee camp rushing towards me at the head of about five children, some of whom I recognize from the same place.

“Hey, Ben!” I say, not needing to force my enthusiasm this time as I crouch down and open an arm to welcome him into a hug. “I’m so glad you could come!”

I sent an invitation to the children’s home about a week ago encouraging some caretakers and children to attend, but I hadn’t received any word back. I look over Benny’s head and smile warmly at the other children and at the caretakers who brought them, who each give me a shy wave.

“I didn’t know you were a Queen,” Benny says, frowning up at my crown after he pulls back from my hug.

“Well, that makes sense,” I say, wrinkling my nose at him. “Considering I just became one today.”

“I thought you had to be born a Queen,” Benny replies, turning his head and studying my crown curiously. Then he turns to look at Rafe, who is dozing a little, his own little crown still perched on his head. “Like him.”

“Well,” I say, considering. “I guess it happens all sorts of ways.”

“So, can I become a king?” Benny asks, curious.

“Is someone already trying to take my job?” Sinclair asks, coming up behind me, and I laugh, looking up at him.

“I think you’ve got some stiff competition,” I reply, and then I stand up, gesturing towards Benny and the other children, introducing them to their King, who graciously leans down and shakes each of the orphans’ little hands. Afterwards, we greet the caretakers warmly, telling them how much we appreciate their work.

“I know that Ella intends to be more deeply involved in the future,” Sinclair says, smiling at me. “If you’ll allow her to.”

“Oh, we’d welcome the help,” one of the caretakers says.

“Then I’ll come visit,” I say with a big smile. But Sinclair squeezes my hand, letting me know that while he recognizes that I could spend all night with these important guests, we have more to see. So I sigh and crouch down again, telling the children about the huge table of deserts in the next room that they’re welcome to raid to their hearts’ content.

Thrilled, the children rush off.

“We’ll have some more desert sent home,” I say to one of the caretakers as she passes, touching her arm on her way. “A whole truck load – enough for all of the children. Would that be all right?”

She nods, thanking me, and then moves on.

“You like them,” Sinclair murmurs in my ear. “You like that little boy most of all.”

“Yes,” I sigh, glancing up at him. “Am I so obvious with my favorites?”

“Only to me,” he whispers, giving me a kiss on the forehead as we both turn to look at our next guest. But when we see who it is, all of the joy leeches from both of us.

Because standing there, in front of us, ready to congratulate us on the happiest day of our lives, is my uncle Xander.

Chapter 442 – A Private Chat

Ella

My face falls into stern, cold lines as I see my uncle step forward. He was invited to this party, of course, as part of the delegation – but honestly, after our stern message to the Atalaxians about how he was not welcome, I'm surprised that he was willing to attend.

I look up at Sinclair and follow his hard gaze towards his security team, which nods to him, assuring him that they fully vetted Xander, ensuring that he held no weapons or means of hurting us.

And considering that my mate is a weapon himself and could tear this man to pieces as easily as breathing, I suppose that there's nothing to worry about either way. Still, I tighten my arms around my child and feel Sinclair bristle behind me, his hackles rising.

Inside me, my wolf has her teeth fully bared, snapping, eager to sink her teeth into this terrible man.

I don't bother to calm her. Her rage is justified.

Perhaps sensing the effect he has on us, Xander smiles a little smugly and steps forward just one step, giving us a deep bow.

"Your highnesses," he says, his voice clear and precise. "I come to offer you my congratulations on your ascension to the throne and the naming of your heir. It is...quite an accomplishment."

"Not without its obstacles, of course," Sinclair says, a bit through his teeth. "But yes, it is a wonderful day – though one darkened by your presence. I'll ask you to leave now, Xander. You are not welcome here, despite the protection of the Atalaxian government. If you refuse, I'll have you removed."

"I'll go," he says, straightening, his eyes going immediately to Rafe in my arms. "I merely wanted a chance to see the child I arranged to bring into the world. He is...as handsome a specimen as I hoped he would be."

"But no desire to see me, or acknowledge my presence?" I snap, riled despite myself. "Your own blood? Your brother's child?"

"My brother's daughter," Xander corrects, not bothering to be vicious with his words or to look at me, his eyes still on Rafe. "My focus rests on the male line."

Slowly, I turn and pass my child to his father, who takes him willingly. Then I take two steps forward, interposing myself between myself and Rafe so that Xander forced to look

at me. When he bends to try to look around me I shift my weight so that he cannot.

“No.” I snap, my voice as cold as ice. “You will look at me, Xander. I am your Queen.”

“You are not my queen,” he hisses, his eyes finally meeting mine, flinty and dark. “I am Atalaxian now.”

“It does not matter to me,” I say, dismissive, and then – without really realizing what I’m doing – I access my gift. I don’t close my eyes to do it this time, instead allowing the lavender calmness to radiate from me, to reach out towards him. I can see it, the lavender tint that the air around us takes, but I’m not sure if everyone can. Not that it really matters.

“What,” Xander breathes, hissing as my gift touches him, as he feels it begin to work, to sweep through his body.

I don’t let it heal, merely seek. And I see...all of it, inside of him.

“You will die,” I say, quietly and calmly. “No matter who your Queen is, or what country you call home. I can see it within you – the cancer is taking hold, spreading throughout. Even if you had gotten Rafe away from us, you wouldn’t have lived long enough to enjoy any real time on your throne.”

“Lies,” Xander hisses, taking a frightened step from me. “You are a witch – like all women -”

“Enjoy the rest of your short life, Xander,” I say with a sigh, turning away from him and returning to Sinclair’s side, taking my child back into my arms. “We need not bother killing you. You’ll be dead soon.”

“You have cursed me – ”

“I didn’t need to,” I interrupt, my voice bored. “Now go away. We have celebrations to attend. I’ll tell Sarah and Jessica you said hello,”

Xander stiffens at this, his eyes flashing as he looks between Sinclair and I. “My property – ” he growls. “You will return them immediately – ”

“People aren’t property, you horrible old fool.” Then I sigh and turn my eyes to Sinclair’s guards and nod. Instantly, they come forward and grab Xander by the arms, dragging him away. He makes a fuss, drawing some gazes, but he’s removed from the room quickly enough that the disturbance largely goes unnoticed.

I sigh then, letting my shoulders slump for a moment as I turn towards Sinclair, resting

my head against his chest. "Are you all right?" he murmurs, running a comforting hand down my back.

"I am," I say, nodding and taking a deep breath. Then I look up at him. "I'm sorry – did I...I don't want to cause an international incident. I hope I did right there."

A little smile turns up his lips. "You did perfectly, Queen," he says, running his knuckles down my cheek. "Do you need a moment?"

"Would you mind?" I ask, looking towards the open door to a small balcony nearby. "Just to...collect myself."

"Not at all," he says, reaching for the baby. But I hold Rafe close.

"I want him with me," I say, grimacing a little.

"Of course," Sinclair murmurs, dropping a kiss to my lips and pressing a hand to my back, urging me to take what time I need. "I'd come with you, but-"

"No," I say, smiling up at him. "The people need their King. We won't keep them waiting."

He nods, proud of me, and I whisper again that I'll only take a moment before heading directly for the balcony and the fresh air it promises. I hear footsteps behind me and look curiously over my shoulder, a smile lighting my face when I see that Sinclair has sent Conner to keep an eye on us if we need him.

Conner smiles back at me, giving me a little nod, and feeling more peaceful already I step out into the dark of the little balcony. It is instantly quieter the moment I step through the doors and I take a deep breath of the fresh night air, closing my eyes for a second as I let the breeze rush over my skin. Rafe burbles a little in happiness, and I laugh, looking down at him. "Do you like the peace and quiet too, baby Prince?" I ask quietly, and he grins and waves his hand, telling me he does.

I laugh again, lifting him a little to press a kiss to his face before stepping to the edge of the balcony, leaning against the rail and letting my body relax.

My mind turns, predictably, to my horrible uncle – and all of the terrible things that he said to me just a few moments ago. I mean, none of them were a surprise – Henry has long suggested that Xander would feel that way about me, about Rafe.

But still – hearing it from his own lips? It was still a blow, to hear someone be so horrible, so callous.

I scowl a little, considering that I perhaps shouldn't have mentioned Sarah and Jessica

at all that that was a slip and a mistake that I tripped into because I was so mad

But I don't get very far into the consideration as a shadow peels itself from the wall, clearing its throat awkwardly.

I jump and give a little shriek as the shadow steps forward.

Chapter 443 – A Drink

“Please,” the shadow says, his voice awkward and apologetic.

I’m still rigid with fear when Conner storms out onto the balcony, his hand smacking the shadow-person in the chest, slamming him against the wall. ” Who the hell are you!?” Conner demands.

“Please!” the shadow says again, “I’m so sorry! I was just standing out here, also getting fresh air! This is a complete accident!”

And suddenly, the voice snaps into place in my memory. “Conner!” I call, Rafe fussing in my arms, not liking the sudden change in my energy and the fear spiking through me, though I’m calmer now. “Please – it’s the Atalaxian Prince. He is – I don’t believe he means us any harm.”

And even though something about that concept doesn’t match up – an Atalaxian? Not meaning us any harm? Especially after the meeting I just had with my uncle?

Still, somehow, I know the truth of it down in my bones. He doesn’t.

Conner glances at me and then backs up a little, removing his hand from the Prince’s chest. “Should I escort him out of here, Luna?”

“No,” I sigh, shaking my head. “Not unless he wants to go, of course. But the night air is for everyone. I can’t have it all to myself just because I’m the Queen.”

The prince looks between Conner and I for a moment, stepping further into the light so I can see his pale features and the details of his chic black suit. “I would...stay, for a moment, if that’s all right? Have a quiet word with you, so that we don’t leave this evening on bad terms?”

“That’s fine,” I say quietly, somehow a little pleased that he will stay. I’m still terribly curious about him, perhaps despite myself.

“Would you mind?” Conner says to the prince, his voice tight. “If I performed a body check? To ensure that you don’t have...”

“Be my guest,” the prince says, spreading his arms wide and allowing Calvin to pat down the sides of his body, and then his legs.

When Conner stands up and nods to me, his face quite serious, I nod back to him and give him a smile, grateful for his protection. “I’ll be just inside the door, Luna,” Conner says.

“Thank you,” I say, genuinely meaning it, hoping that he hears the sincerity in my voice. Conner nods again and steps to the door, standing with one foot in the ballroom and the other out on the balcony, a constant threat to Calvin should he make one wrong move.

“Protective of you,” Calvin says, glancing at Conner and taking a few steps closer to me not too close, but close enough to be conversational. “As he should be. Your men are loyal.”

“As loyal to me as I am to them,” I say with a little shrug, studying Calvin’s face carefully. As I do, I wonder a little how did he blend so seamlessly into the shadows? It’s not that dark out here was I just so distracted that I missed him?

Or is something else going on?

“Congratulations,” Calvin says, dipping into a little bow. “The ceremony today was very moving, as was the vote. It is inspiring to see how much your people support you – the wolves and the humans both.”

“Is it?” I ask, turning my head a little. “Do you...not get this kind of support from your own people?”

“I’m afraid it’s not a question we ask them,” he says, his voice a little chagrined. “My father’s policy is instead to...tell the people how they feel about the royal family. And then punish them if they show any evidence to the contrary.”

I raise my eyebrows, genuinely surprised that he’s being so candid with me.

“I can’t say that I think this policy is wise,” I murmur, wanting to shout from the rooftop that his father is a tyrant, but working very, very hard to be a diplomatic Queen.

“You can be harsher than that if you wish, Queen,” Calvin says, smirking a little as he takes a step closer at me and studies my face for a moment before dropping his gaze to Rafe in my arms. “I certainly won’t tell anyone.” He’s quiet for a moment and I adjust the baby so he can see my son better.

A smile comes to Calvin’s face. “Your son is a very handsome boy,” he says, smiling at Rafe. “I’m sure he’ll grow to be a strong King, like his father.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly, looking proudly down at Rafe myself. Then I look up at Calvin, curious. He’s young, I think my own age – certainly younger than Sinclair – but, well, I’m a parent, aren’t I?

“Do you have children of your own, Calvin?” I ask.

I find myself surprised when he nods and smiles, bringing his gaze up to mine. “Two,” he says, his smile growing as he thinks of them. “My Luna gave birth to our son just a few months ago – he’s just barely older than this one here.”

I grin broadly at him, liking him even more now that I know he’s a father. There’s something about that – the alliance between parents who love their children. And damn it, even if I was determined to hate the Atalaxians... well, I can’t hate all of them now, can I?

Which, I suppose, is perhaps what this prince wanted.

But something about what he said...I turn my head a little, curious. Something about his words strikes me as...wrong. And I can’t put my finger on it just yet.

“And your other child?” I ask, curious.

“My daughter just turned three,” he replies, his smile increasing. “She is...well, she makes me laugh more than I thought anyone ever could. She’s a joy to me.”

“That’s wonderful,” I say quietly, smiling up at this man who is such a surprise. Because he seems – honestly, he seems like he could be a friend. ” Dominic and I hope to give Rafe a little sister at some point, to torture him a bit.”

Calvin laughs at this, shaking his head. “No, little girls are always a gift. I’m sure Rafe will treasure her.”

“Calvin,” I say softly, almost a sigh, taking another step closer and taking a risk, unable to hold back my words any more. “Considering your country’s policies on women and girls – you have to realize that what you’re saying comes as a surprise to me.”

He nods slowly, sighing a bit through his nose. “Well perhaps it is less of a surprise to you then,” he says softly, his words barely audible as he glances towards the door. “That the father of a very beloved daughter might want a stronger alliance with a nation that feels very differently about girls and their futures.”

I look up at him and see true honesty in his eyes, and I’m struck and moved by it. I open my mouth to make him that promise of friendship on the spot when suddenly I realize...

That while Calvin has mentioned twice how much he loves his daughter and wants more for her...he didn’t include her mother in that sentiment. And when he mentioned her before, he referred to her not as his “mate,” but as his “Luna.”

I frown now, confused, staring up at him.

“What?” Calvin asks, taking another step towards me, concerned I think to see my concern. He reaches out a hand, I think instinctually, seeking to press it against my own arm to help where he can-

And as he leans closer, suddenly his scent hits me in a wave-

My eyes go wide as I breathe in the crisp winter scent of him – starlight on snow, and frost, and bergamot – my nose even tingles the way it does when I sense snow in the air

–

And – something moves within me I don’t know what, because it’s not...it’s not big enough to be truly real, but it is something that feels remarkably like

Like...a bond.

A bond, between me and this strange prince.

And as I step away from him the prince’s eyes go wide as he senses it too.

Chapter 444 – Into You

“Ella,” Clavin says, his voice thick with emotion. His hand continues its path, reaching for me, his fingers brushing the velvet sleeve of my gown before I can pull away.

“What,” I whisper, taking a few steps back, wanting space between us. “What was that?”

“I don’t – ”

Before he can finish though, we both turn towards the darkened doorway to the balcony. I instantly recognize the silhouette I see there as my mate’s and breathe out a breath of relief.

I mean it’s not that I think that Calvin or I did anything wrong, or that Calvin was going to hurt me, but whatever passed between us? It was strange.

And suddenly as I remember the pulse that happened last night, when Calvin touched my hand – I want my mate here, now, at my side.

“Is everything all right out here?” Sinclair growls, his voice low and full of the threat that his words don’t carry.

He takes a step forward into the darkness as Calvin takes a step away from me and bows to him, both a formality shown to a king and a display of deference to an Alpha who thinks he might sense a threat to his mate.

“Everything is fine, Dominic,” I say, holding out a hand to him, doing my best to keep my voice light though I suspect I’m failing a little bit. “Prince Calvin was just telling me about his children. Did you know that he has a son just older than Rafe? And his daughter is three.”

“I did not know,” Sinclair says, prowling to my side, his eyes fixed on the Atalaxian prince. “Your family keeps such information close to their chest, do they not?”

“We do,” Calvin confirms, his voice formal and quiet now. “Though, we do share it with our closest friends. And I very much hope that after this trip that I will be able to tell my children about my new friends in Moon Valley.”

“I hope so as well,” I say, hoping my words assure Calvin that I’m on his side, and to persuade Sinclair that no matter what he sensed, Calvin has not done or meant me any harm.

“I don’t know if this is going to be possible,” Sinclair says quietly, his voice grumbling and stern as he stands close at my side, pressing his hands into his pockets and looking Calvin up and down. “Especially after the stunts your delegation has been pulling with

Xander. He upset Ella very much tonight. Were you aware of this?"

Calvin sighs and looks at me, his face genuinely pained. "I was not, What did he do?"

Briefly, Sinclair informs Calvin of Xander's approach, his refusal to look me in the eye. Calvin sighs deeply as he listens, lifting a hand to rub at his eyes in frustration and I think embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," Calvin says, dropping his hand and looking first at me and then at Sinclair. "It is...please, I beg you to consider that there was and is dissent within our nation. While I'm sure that some of our delegation encouraged Xander and support his disgusting ideas, some of us want better."

"Well," Sinclair says slowly. "Then I'd look forward to speaking further with those persons."

"If you'll allow me to set it up," the prince says quietly, "I will do so."

"Please," Sinclair says. And then he shuts his mouth, clear that that's his final word on the subject this evening.

Calvin bows again, to each of us, and then says he'll put the wheels in motion before stepping towards the door. When he reaches it, he clasps Conner on the shoulder and bids him a good night as well, a move that adds another tick in his favor as far as I'm concerned. I quite like it when persons of power make a point to acknowledge people in positions of service.

But, knowing that's less important at this particular moment, I look up at Sinclair. "Is everything all right?"

"I thought I'd ask you the same," he says, looming over me a bit, clearly displeased.

"What?" I ask, frowning, confused. "What did I do?"

"What are you doing out here, Ella?" Sinclair says, shaking his head at me a little. "Having private conversations with a member of our enemies' royal family?"

"You heard him, Dominic!" I say, waving a hand towards the door. "He wants to make a change!"

"Or he's just telling you he wants a change," Sinclair growls, "to get you on his side. He knows you're soft hearted! He told you about his children who we don't even know exist – in order to soften you up!"

“Hey,” I snap, pointing a finger up into his face. “I may be soft-hearted, Dominic, but that’s something you value about me. You can’t have it both ways – you can’t love that about me and then use it as a reason to discredit me when it’s convenient for you.”

Sinclair sighs and then nods his head. “All right, that’s fair,” he murmurs. “But Ella, we agreed that you’d let me take the lead on these things – that you would allow me to take care of you, to set our path.”

“I still agree to that,” I say gently, stepping close to him now and dropping my hand, looking up at him with wide and loving eyes. “Dominic, if you tell me never to see him again, I won’t. But last night you told me to trust my instincts, and they’re telling me to trust him. Prince Calvin – he speaks to me and if this is an in with the Atalaxians? A way to create an alliance, to avoid war, to perhaps even help some of the women within that nation? Wouldn’t we want to accept that?”

“He speaks to you,” Sinclair growls, “because he’s into you.”

I burst out laughing at this and Sinclair’s growl deepens, which – I mean, it’s probably not good – but honestly it just makes me laugh harder.

“Dominic!” I say, giving him a little shove on the shoulder. “He is not-he has a Luna! And two children! There’s absolutely nothing to suggest that his interest in me is anything but friendly and political.”

“You don’t see the way he looks at you, Ella,” my mate growls, jealousy in every thrum of his voice. “I’m used to watching Alphas approach a she-wolf they desire – it is distinct -”

“Dominic,” I sigh, raising a hand to press to his cheek. “Just because you’re into me doesn’t mean that everyone is. Some men just want to be friends.”

Sinclair laughs at me then, roughly, shaking his head. “Ella, my love, every man that meets you wants you. I think that you’re just so used to being looked at with desire that you fail to see the signs.”

“Well,” I murmur, stepping even closer now, letting my body press against his as I look up at him between my lashes. “I don’t miss it when you look at me that way.”

My mate pauses for a moment, his breath hitching, and then he growls anew, grabbing me into his arms and pressing me close, though he is of course careful not to smush the baby. “That’s not fair, Ella,” he murmurs. “You can’t end every argument by seducing me.”

“Says who,” I whisper, my voice throaty and low.

He laughs, then, dipping his head and kissing me like he can't help it. Which, considering how much I want that kiss, if he feels anything like I do right now perhaps he can't.

"Come on," he murmurs as he pulls away. "Let's get back inside. We still have guests to greet – it's going to be a long night."

"I know," I say, lifting the baby a little higher as I allow my mate to direct me back towards the ballroom. "And then, tomorrow, another big day."

"A wedding," he confirms, looking down at me. "A big day, and a happy one."

"I know," I say, grinning up at him. "I'm so excited for Cora and Roger. It's going to be lots of fun."

Chapter 445 – Wedding Preparations

Ella

“Ella!” Cora shouts from the closet, her voice a little frantic. “Ella, help! Please!”

I turn quickly towards the closet, a biscuit and a cup of coffee in each of my hands and Rafe strapped to my chest in his little carrier. “What’s wrong?” I call as I hurry towards her.

But I see the problem immediately as I come to the door, with Cora wrapped up in yards of fabric and one of the stylists tugging fervently at the buttons which close the back.

“It doesn’t fit,” Cora says, her face worried.

“What?” I say, my eyes going a little wide. “But we did a fitting two days ago did you -”

“I guess I got bigger,” Cora sighs, looking down at the little baby bump that makes me so happy to see. “I don’t know – it would be a ridiculous thing to consider with a human baby, but with the way these wolves grow? In leaps and bounds?” She looks back up at me, shaking her head. “I’m sorry Ella what the hell are we going to do?”

“We’re going to use the back-up dress,” I say, grinning widely and shoving the rest of the cookie in my mouth while I put my coffee down on a shelf. Then I move for a big white box I’ve kept secretly in the corner under a pile of other big white boxes.

“Oh, thank god,” the stylist murmurs under her breath, making me laugh.

“Can you call the seamstresses?” I say to the second stylist, who nods and steps away to place a call on her phone. “We might need some last-minute alterations.”

“I can’t believe you planned all this, Ella,” Cora sighs as I take the top off the box and reveal an identical wedding gown, just one size larger. “How...how did you even have the foresight to see this coming?”

“I had a wolf pregnancy too!” I say, lifting the dress out and carrying it over. “I remember how unpredictable it is. At least you aren’t being flown over to another country right now in a middle of a war.”

“True” Cora says, beginning to strip off the first wedding dress as I hang up her second and begin to steam it. “This is....slightly less stressful than that. But only barely.”

I laugh a little, shaking my head and glancing over my shoulder at her. “So,” I say, eager. “Are you excited?”

“Um,” Cora says, her voice high and noncommittal-

I gasp a little and turn fully to her now. “You’re not excited for your wedding!?”

“Ella!” she says, laughing and shaking her head at me as she steps fully out of the dress and the stylist takes it away. “You know that none of this has been important to me, and that Roger and I already had the mating ceremony to end all mating ceremonies. So,” she shrugs, “this all makes me more anxious than anything.”

“Aww,” I say, moving to my sister, the steamer still in my hand. “Don’t be anxious, Cora. It’s going to go beautifully!”

Cora sighs and smiles at me before dipping her head to kiss Rafe on his. He burbles up at her, happily kicking his legs, making her laugh. “You’re more comfortable in the limelight than me, sis,” she says with a smile. “The way you handled the coronation yesterday-

“I was a mess at the coronation! I ran backwards! I cried!”

“It was perfectly you though,” she says, raising her eyebrows at me with a smile. “Everyone loved it. I loved it.”

“Well,” I say, grinning at her, “you just be perfectly you! And it will be just as great.”

“If you say so,” she says with a grin, crossing her arms across her chest. “Actually, do you have a robe or something I can wear while I wait for the dress to be ready? I’m chilly.”

“Here try this,” I say, pointing the steamer at her and letting out a little burst of warm steam that makes her jump and laugh.

“Get away from me, demon,” she says, swatting at me and laughing, making me turn away and get back to work. But even as I point to the robe hanging up in a corner of the closet and Cora dashes over to pull it on, I am filled with excitement.

Because this day? I have a feeling it’s going to be a really good one.

We’re holding the wedding in the great hall, where we had the coronation yesterday, but it has been satisfyingly transformed. I was a little hesitant about the choice because I didn’t want everything to look the same, and like we couldn’t make something special for Cora and Roger, but...well, it’s the biggest space we’ve got, and there are crowds of people already waiting outside of the palace in addition to the hundreds we’ve invited to attend as guests.

“Wow,” I say, turning around in the empty hall with Sinclair at my side, Rafe in my arms in a chic little tuxedo with a white jacket. To my chagrin, he wouldn’t consent to wear his little crown today – kept taking it off his head – but...well, I suppose that’s all right. “It’s incredible, Dominic – it’s beyond what I imagined it could be -”

“How is that possible,” he laughs, looking around, “when you planned it all?”

Sinclair is dressed to match Rafe, a little surprise I planned that makes him laugh. But they’re already such twins anyway, I think that it’s adorable. Not wanting to show up the bride, I opted for a very pale green that looks pretty with my hair. We decided not to wear our crowns today, wanting to be very much the siblings of the bride and groom instead of King and Queen, but well, we look nice without them too. I look my family over and am very pleased with the picture we present.

“I don’t know how it’s possible,” I say, looking around the room again in awe. “I mean, I told them my ideas, but this team – they really took it and ran. It’s amazing!”

And I’m not exaggerating – not at all. I told the team that I wanted everything to be white – white roses, white satin, white candles – but this? The entire room looks like a fairytale. And when the sun flows in the windows and brightens the whole space?

“It really is incredible,” my mate says, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me close to his side. “You did beautifully, trouble.”

“I didn’t do it, the aids did!” I laugh, but I turn my face up for a kiss, accepting the compliment. Sinclair bends a little, kissing me lightly, before turning towards the aid who bustle up the aisle.

“Are we ready, sir?” she asks, looking up from the iPad settled in the crook of her arm. “To begin letting the guests in?”

Sinclair looks at me and raises his eyebrows. I nod eagerly and smile at the aid. “I think so. Let’s get this started!”

The aid grins at me and eagerly rushes off as Sinclair and I head to the front of the room, where we intend to greet as many guests as we can as they come in. Of course, we won’t be able to say hello to them all – far too many – but I intend to do my best.

“Ready, little prince?” I ask, smiling down at my baby, who looks up at me and gives a happy little squeal, passing excitement down the bond and making me laugh.

“We’re lucky he likes crowds and attention,” Sinclair murmurs as the aids move to the doors, starting to pull them open. “If he was a shy prince, he’d have a much harder time.”

“He knows how much we love him, and how much everyone else does too!” I say, unable to help squeezing my little baby and covering his little head with kisses. “How could they help it? He’s such a cutie.”

“Just like his mama,” Sinclair murmurs, dropping a kiss to my own head that makes me smile up at him.

But before we have time to say anything else? The doors are open, and the crowds start to fill the room.

“Welcome!” I call, stepping forward to greet Cora’s first guest.

Chapter 446 – The Wedding

Even though Cora got ready in my room at the palace, we did a great deal of work to make this wedding as public as possible as public as our coronation, if not more so. In order to do that, once Cora was dressed we escorted her down to the garage-level of the palace to where a beautiful open- top vintage Rolls Royce was waiting to drive her around to the front.

“Are you serious?” she had said, rolling her eyes, but she was laughing at the same time – because, honestly, it was very cool.

Roger had his doubts about the plan, wanting to know if it was safe, but all the security details that Sinclair had put out had assured us that there were no major threats to our safety. The majority of the humans who objected to a wolf King had either been satiated by Sinclair’s sincere promises that humans and wolves would be on equal footing or have taken their complaints underground.

And, as Cora suggested to me last night, actually a great number of people humans and wolves alike are very excited about the reality of having a royal family to call their own.

Sinclair and I see the proof of this when we finish welcoming the hundreds of guests who will be inside our Hall for the ceremony and step forward towards the doors, where we can see Cora’s car turning down the road.

The crowds lining the streets in front of the palace go wild when they see us, shouting and cheering for Sinclair, for Rafe, and – I blush when I hear it – for me as well. Sinclair starts to wave to everyone so, smiling, I do too, and then –

I hold the baby up so everyone can see, and the roar goes louder.

Sinclair and I laugh at that as I tuck Rafe again securely by my side, pleased as I think any parents would be when people show affection for our child.

But my smile grows when the cheers turn towards Cora, their duchess, as she waves to them from the car that drives her down the road.

Cora’s name has been in print quite a bit lately, and this morning a huge piece was published on the two of us the two sisters who were raised human and have found themselves at the center of all of this drama. It was a flattering piece that focused the majority of its attention on my sister only fitting, as it’s her wedding we’re celebrating today – and our struggles as orphans, her time putting herself through medical school, her rather unknown and private relationship with Roger Sinclair.

I had tried to show it to Cora this morning, fawning over the pictures, but she had waved it away, not wanting to see it, I think a little embarrassed by the attention.

But that Cora is gone now, replaced by a beaming woman in a beautiful wedding gown, her long veil trailing down her back as she waves eagerly to the people who have come to see her off on her wedding day, who call her name and wish her luck.

I glance back over my shoulder to where I see Roger and Henry standing at the front of the room the place where an altar would be, were this a religious ceremony. Roger gives me a thumbs-up and Henry waves, and then Sinclair and I step forward out of the palace and begin to walk down the steps to escort my sister inside.

“This is crazy,” Cora whispers, laughing as Sinclair offers a hand to help her step out of the car.

“It’s cool, though, right?” I say, laughing too as I wrap my sister in a hug. “You look beautiful, Cora,” I add, tears filling my eyes as I take in my sister in her incredibly gorgeous wedding gown, which manages to flatter while making no secret of her pregnancy. After all, we’re very proud of the new addition to our family.

“Oh geeze,” Cora says, shaking her head and reaching a hand up to wipe at my cheeks. “Seriously, Ella, you can’t start this now we’re never going to make it through the day –”

“If you think this is her first time crying,” Sinclair says, smirking and reaching for Rafe, “then you’re woefully mistaken, sister-in-law.”

Cora laughs then as I pass Rafe off to his father and she loops her arm through mine.

“Ready?” I say, sniffing the rest of my tears back and smiling.

“Sure am,” she says, giving me a wink.

And then, following our King up the stairs, Cora and I make our way towards the palace. When we get to the top of the stairs, we turn to wave to the crowds who all cheer wildly, and then we turn inside. The aids close the door behind us and the music begins to play.

“Congratulations, Cora,” Sinclair says, kissing her on the cheek before starting down the aisle.

It’s a very short little wedding procession for our duchess. Cora has friends, of course, but none she felt close to or comfortable enough asking to be a bridesmaid. So, we decided to keep it short and sweet, perhaps reflecting more wolf tradition than human.

Sinclair and Rafe are thus the only ones who process before the bride, and I smile to see Rafe looking interestedly around the room at all of Cora’s well-wishers.

When my mate and child reach the front of the room, the music changes, turning into the classic wedding waltz.

"I love you," I say, standing on my toes to kiss my sister's cheek, knowing that it's our turn.

"Love you more," she murmurs as she kisses me back.

And then, her arm in mine, I walk my sister down the aisle.

We had talked about this at length, of course but in absence of any real father figure, Cora asked me to walk her. And, obviously, I cried my eyes out and said yes. Henry offered but...

Well, it's always been me and Cora, hasn't it? We've been mother and father to each other, sister and best friend. So, me walking her down the aisle on the day she marries her mate and her best friend?

It's right. It feels absolutely right.

And it gives me the most magnificent view of Roger's face as his eyes focus on Cora, as his face falls to see how beautiful she looks, as he forgets to breathe and just...stares at her.

I bite my lip, glancing up at my sister, seeing her practically glowing with joy, speeding up with her eagerness to be at his side.

"Cora," Roger whispers, taking three steps forward when we get to the front of the room and climb the short set of stairs to the dais. "You look..."

Unbidden, she reaches for him, wanting his touch. He grasps her hand and, shaking his head, begins to pull her close. But Cora stops for a moment, looking over at me. "Do you consent, sis?" she says, grinning at me. "To give me away?"

"To this guy?" I say, raising my eyebrows and pretending to look Roger dubiously up and down.

Both laugh, and Roger shakes his head at me. "I'm taking her whether you consent or not, Ella," he says, grinning, Cora's hand still held tight in his.

"Well then," I say, smiling between the two of them. "Good thing I agree."

My sister and I hug once again before I let her go and move to stand next to my mate, taking my baby eagerly back into my arms.

“They look good together,” Sinclair whispers in my ear, his eyes on my sister and his brother. “It’s right, the two of them.”

“They’re so lucky to have us,” I say, sighing and grinning at him. “To have brought them together.”

Sinclair laughs a little and shakes his head. “Nah,” he says. “These two? They’d have found their way to each other. Fated mates,” he says, slipping his hand around mine. “We have a way of doing that, don’t we.”

“We sure do,” I sigh, resting my head on his shoulder.

And then, a blissful smile on my face the whole time, I watch my sister marry her mate.

Chapter 447 – Reception

Cora and Roger's reception goes late into the night, which is just fine by me because for the first time this week? Sinclair and I haven't been the focus of the attention, and we just get to party.

I mean, that's not completely true. We're still the King and the Queen of our nation and we can't ignore our duties entirely. But it's much, much easier when Cora and Roger are the ones who work their way around the room, greeting all of their guests and thanking them for their attendance.

I smile as I sip at my soda during a break in the dancing, watching as Roger holds Cora close to his side as they chat to some people I don't know old friends of Cora's from med school, I think.

"He hasn't kept his hands off her all night," Sinclair says, laughing a little. I grin up at him. "Look who's talking," I say, glancing down at his own arm wrapped firmly around me.

"What can I say," he murmurs, grinning down at me. "You're very touchable."

Rafe, resting sleepily against my chest, gives a little squeak that makes us laugh.

"Don't worry, baby," Sinclair says, lowering his head to kiss Rafe's soft hair. "You're very cute too, I haven't forgotten."

Rafe grumbles a little but relaxes, his eyes drifting closed against me.

"I don't think he's going to make it much longer," I say with a sigh, considering my little baby. "Do you think the party will miss me too much if I bow out early?"

"The party will miss its most beautiful guest, surely," Sinclair says, and I roll my eyes a little at his flattery, "but I'm sure everyone will forgive. And Cora will be jealous."

"Nah," I say, eyeing my sister across the room. She hasn't stopped smiling since we walked down the aisle. "She's having a good time – like I knew she would. Cora always thinks she doesn't want a fuss until she gets it, and then she's pleased."

"She's lucky to have you," Sinclair says. We relax for a moment, me considering my escape, but then I feel Sinclair go stiff beside me.

"What is it?" I ask, peering up at him.

"Nothing new," he murmurs, his eyes on the far side of the room. "Just..."

Atalaxians.”

“Oh,” I say, my heart falling a bit. I saw Calvin for a moment earlier in the day when he came to say hello and to congratulate Cora, but he’s the only Atalaxian that I can even begin to say I like. The others?

Well, they’re here, as all of the delegations from foreign nations were invited to the ceremony and the reception in full. But earlier, when I saw that my uncle actually had the gall to show up? I was completely shocked.

“Is he still there?” I ask, trying to stand on my tiptoes to see, but I’m too short.

“He is indeed,” Sinclair murmurs, clearly as unhappy about it as I am. Xander hasn’t tried to talk to us tonight hasn’t even attempted to give his congratulations – which is fine by me. Still, I think both of us will be much happier when he’s gone.

Sinclair frowns a little, keeping his eyes focused on the group of foreigners across the room, and I feel a little worry twisting inside me. I glance at my mate, wondering if it’s coming from him, or if I’m intuiting it myself.

But suddenly, a great deal of shouting breaks out from that corner of the room and my stomach drops.

Sinclair is instantly in motion, grabbing my hand and striding across the room. I hurry my pace to keep up with his long strides, almost running, and Rafe wakes up against me with an upset little squeal. I send calm thoughts down the bond to him to let him know that all is well, and he quiets, but I think he can still sense my agitation because he’s awake now and fussing against me.

“What is this,” Sinclair demands, his voice loud as he steps into the middle of a large group of people. My mate keeps his hand around mine though I stand a little back from him, letting him take charge.

But I immediately see the problem, and I am not at all surprised that my uncle is at the center of it.

My eyes dart around at the people several Atalaxian men, looking chic if rigid in their tuxedos, bristle as they frown at a human woman with her twin daughters pressed tight against her side. The woman looks worriedly around at all of the foreign men.

“I – I’m sorry,” she says, her voice clearly upset and confused. “We – the girls were hoping to have more of the candy,” she says, looking up at Sinclair and trying to explain, clearly thinking herself in trouble. She gestures towards the little individually wrapped bars of peppermint bark – Cora’s favorite -that we left at each guest’s seat as part of

their party favors.

"I noticed that...this table hadn't eaten theirs," she continues, her voice tight, "and the girls, they just asked..."

"How dare you," my uncle growls, looking down at the woman and her children with clear disdain, "even speak to me, let alone beg of me a favor

My mouth drops open completely in my shock at this horrible man. Seriously? He views human women as so far below him that he flips out when they speak to him?

"Enough," Sinclair cuts in, his voice a hot knife through the tension. The Atalaxians, who originally lined themselves behind Xander, note that my mate is clearly supporting our guest and then fall back a step, hesitating in the face of the opposition.

"I made it clear," Sinclair says, focusing his eyes now on my uncle, "that your ridiculous politics have no place in my court. I have no control over how you treat people in your new home in Atalaxia, but here? You will respect my guests, no matter their gender or their shifter status." He takes a step forward, squeezing my hand once before dropping it to truly loom over my uncle. "Now. Is there any final confusion on that point?"

I quickly step to the woman, who I unfortunately don't know, and slip an arm around her shoulder. "I'm so sorry," I whisper, shaking my head, hopefully letting her know with the earnestness on my face that this was a complete mistake. "Please," I say, turning her away and smiling down at her daughters. "You did nothing wrong come with me, we'll get you as much chocolate as you can carry -"

But before we can fully turn away, a snarl rips from my uncle, making us all turn and freeze as he hunches before Sinclair, clearly on the edge of transforming into his wolf.

"I will not be cowed," Xander growls, "by some over-eager pup who lets women and humans run his house my line is the true power in this nation

"Be careful, Xander," Sinclair says, allowing his own ferocity rise to the surface as he steps closer to this smaller, older man this wolf he could end in a second, were it his choice. "

I've taken out stronger men than you. And I won't let you again question my choices, or my mate."

Xander snarls up at Sinclair, clearly wanting a fight, but the wolf in him knows that he's already been beat. Despite himself, the old man takes a step back, his shoulders hunching instinctually under the force of Sinclair's stare.

“This is my kingdom now,” Sinclair says, his voice soft and deadly. “And you and your kind? By which I mean prejudiced old bigots? You are the ones who are not welcome.”

He takes a moment, then to stare hatefully into Xander’s eyes before lifting his gaze to the rest of the Atalaxian delegation, letting them know that the message counts for them as well if they take Xander’s side.

Only Calvin has the grace to hang his head in shame. The rest, I can tell, are still making up their minds as to their next move.

Chapter 448 – Borrowed Trouble

Ella

I feel the poor human woman's shoulders shake and I take a deep breath, remembering my duty to her as well. "Come on," I say, trying to keep my voice light as I turn her and her daughters away. "I'm so sorry about this – let's get somewhere more peaceful."

And as we begin to walk away, I leave my faith in Sinclair to settle this as he will. But I hope to hell the Atalaxians know what's good for them, because my mate?

He won't hesitate to fight, if they push him to it. And if they do? I shake my head, considering how fast each of them will lose.

But I put this out of my mind, chatting lightly with the woman as we move away, asking her name. The woman introduces herself as Tempest Bowers, a journalist and the wife of an elected official of one of our eastern provinces. Genuinely pleased to meet her, I begin to ask more questions about their lives as we move to the head table, where I know for certain that there is plenty of candy for the girls to take.

But before we can get there, someone hits my shoulder – hard as they pass, making me stumble. My ankle twists in my high heel and I lose my balance, threatening to fall, gasping and holding Rafe tight to me.

Tempest grabs my arm just in time.

"Oh my goodness," she says, her eyes wide as she helps me regain my balance. And then both of our eyes move to follow the hateful old man my uncle, of course who hit me hard with his shoulder on his way out. He does not bother to look back and apologize.

Of course, why would he? He did it on purpose.

"He's a hateful old creep, isn't he?" I ask, frowning after the man, and the woman to my surprise – bursts out laughing.

"He is certainly a piece of work," she says, nodding along and dropping my arm. "Do you...know him?"

"He's my uncle," I say with a grimace, making her laugh again, harder this time.

"I have some in my family," Tempest says, looking after him as he storms from the room, "who are...less pleasant too. So, I can emote with that."

I smile genuinely at her then, liking this woman very much. We finish crossing to the table where Sinclair and I had our dinner and I hand the girls as many candy bars as I

can find left on the table, knowing no one will miss them. The girls begin to grin as their hands fill, excited at their bounty.

“Okay, enough!” Tempest says, putting her hands out and laughing. “Go find dad, all right?” she says, nodding to them.

“They’re beautiful girls,” I say as I watch them run away.

“Thank you,” Tempest replies, reaching out to run a finger across Rafe’s sleepy cheek. “Your own is a very handsome little guy himself.”

“Oh, he flatters himself so,” I say on a happy little sigh, looking down at my kid with a smile. “And I agree, but I am biased.”

Tempest glances over her shoulder, seeing Sinclair striding towards us. ”

“I’ll leave you to this,” she says, gesturing towards him. “But it was very nice to meet you, your highness – and thank you, very much, for your help over there. I apologize for any trouble – we really didn’t know – ”

“Please,” I say, my eyebrows going up. “You did nothing wrong. And please call me Ella,” I say with a grin. “After that? We have to be on a first name basis.”

Tempest laughs and nods, stepping away from me with a little wave just before Sinclair gets to my side.

“Are you all right?” he asks, his voice worried. Then his eyes follow my new friend as she walks away. “Is she?”

“She seems well recovered,” I say, pleased, “though I wish it hadn’t happened at all. I mean honestly, why would the Atalaxians even come to a party of mixed humans and wolves when they despise the idea so much?”

“I sense,” Sinclair replies with a grimace, “that they were looking for a bit of a fight. Or, at least that Xander was.”

“Really?” I ask, my eyes going wide.

“I’m starting to wonder,” Sinclair murmurs, his eyes on the door where Xander just left, “if the Atalaxians brought him to have someone to pick their fight for them. I mean, come on they had to know he’s at the end of his rope and wasn’t going to just come along for the ride.”

“Clever,” I say, stepping closer to him and likewise looking towards the door. “Bringing

someone who they knew would force you to show your cards.”

“And it may not be done,” he sighs. I look up at Sinclair to ask why, but we’re both distracted when the bride and groom come to our sides.

“Is everything okay?” Cora asks, stepping close to me and I think unconsciously reaching for the baby. I smile a little, handing him over to her, pleased to see how much Rafe’s auntie loves to have him close by. “What was all that?”

Roger stands solidly next to Sinclair and I turn my fond gaze to him now. He’s not as familiar with human wedding traditions as Cora and I are, but I have to admit – he makes quite the handsome groom, and I think he’s been enjoying the party.

Still, as he stands there listening to Sinclair recap the events? He’s every bit the King’s responsible second, eager to help.

I take a deep breath, so grateful again for my family, but I’m distracted from this pleasure by Roger’s next words.

“I don’t know, Dominic,” Roger says, his hands on his hips as he, too, looks towards the door. “I don’t trust this. If he was publicly embarrassed and his new nation didn’t stand up for what he believes to be his rights, as you suggest, I’m not sure a man like Xander is going to be content with just going back to his room to pout.”

“I have to agree,” a voice chimes in, and Roger and Sinclair part to reveal Calvin standing there behind them, his own face worried. “I came to let you know that trouble is brewing, but...I think you’ve already figured it out.”

“Really?” I say, taking a step forward, my face falling. “Is he...do you know what he has planned?”

“I don’t think he has a plan,” Calvin says, his eyes immediately on me and only on me. “But he believes himself to have been insulted. I don’t think he’s going to take it lightly. And quite frankly, I think he was egged on by some of our constituents tonight. I think...” he sighs, looking down at his shoes, ashamed, “honestly, I’m sorry, but I think they wanted to set him off like this.”

I sigh deeply, suddenly worried, but I don’t miss Roger and Sinclair carefully assessing Calvin as my mind races, trying to figure out what to do.

“Let’s go,” Cora says, nodding towards the door and taking my hand. “There’s no point in standing here worried. Let’s go back to the room where we know we’re safe, where we can find out what’s going on and regroup – ”

“Cora,” I say, frowning up at her. ” We’re not going to drag you away from your wedding reception – ”

“Oh,” she says, waving a dismissive hand and rolling her eyes. “Don’t get me wrong, Ella, this has been amazing but come on, you know that none of this really mattered to me. I’d much rather get the baby back to the room, where we can feel safe.”

I bite my lip, hesitating, but Roger is at her side in a second. “She’s right, Ella,” he says, glancing around at the party. I look around too and see that Sinclair is having a private word with Calvin, thanking him for his help. My eyes stick to them, worried, but I pull my gaze away with a sigh.

“You’re sure?” I ask, honestly thinking that it would make me happiest.

“This party is going on all night with or without us,” Roger says with a grin. ” Honestly, no one will notice that we’re gone.”

“All right,” I breathe as Sinclair comes back to our side with a sigh. ”

Everything okay with the prince?” I ask.

He nods to me and looks around at our little group. “To the rooms?”

“War command,” Roger says, giving a firm nod. I’ll get dad and meet you there. And with that, the four of us put the wedding behind us and head out, ready to take on whatever Xander is bringing for us next.

Because we all know it – Xanders’ got something up his sleeve.

He didn’t come here to celebrate.

He came to take his last shot.

And the Atalaxians? They’re letting him.

Chapter 449 – Grasping at Straws

Ella

Sinclair walks Cora and I swiftly back to our suite of rooms, Rafe still bundled safely in Cora's arms. When we get there, Sinclair gives me a swift kiss on my head, already looking down the hall.

"I'm going to catch up with Roger," he murmurs. "We'll send dad to you whenever we find him -"

"Why," I say, grabbing his hand, worried. "Why don't you all just come here?"

Sinclair shakes his head as he looks down at me. "We need eyes on Xander we have to talk to the staff, see if anyone knows where he went. I promise – we'll both come to you as soon as we have more information. All right?"

I bite my lip but I nod, not liking it but trusting him. With his own nod of assurance, Sinclair strides away.

"Come on, bride," I say, pushing the door open to my room and allowing Cora to sweep through with my baby and her long train. "Let's get you changed into something more comfortable."

"Oh, thank goodness," Cora sighs. "I mean, this dress is fantastic, but it's heavy."

"Oh, you poor thing, in fifty pounds of silk and satin," I murmur sarcastically, kicking off my heels and leading all of us into the closet. Before I do anything, though, I take my sweet baby from my sister and lower him down into the wheeled bassinet that's waiting there for him. I'll transfer him to his real crib later, but he's perfectly happy taking a little nap here before I change him.

"He's such an easy baby," Cora says with a sigh as I move behind her and start to un-do all of the buttons that run down her back. "How did you get so lucky?"

"He's just an angel," I say, my voice overly doting, making us laugh. "But seriously," I say, "I think wolf babies are just different. A lot less crying, a lot more understanding between parents and child even when they're that young. It's incredibly convenient."

"I hope that's true," Cora says, her hand absently going to her own stomach. "I don't have as much patience as you, so if this kid isn't as easy as Rafey here? We're going to have trouble."

"You'll be great," I say, grinning at her as I finish with the buttons and she starts to shimmy out of the dress. As she does I move to lift the soft white sweatsuit I had made

for her off the shelf. Cora gasps when she sees it. "Ella!" she says, hands on her hips. "You didn't!"

"It says Mrs. Sinclair on the back," I say, grinning and handing it to her.

"It's too much," she says, sighing and waving her hand. "Honestly, Ella, you keep it – you're Mrs. Sinclair too! And you've given us too much already with all of this -"

"Oh stop," I say, rolling my eyes and grinning, pressing it into her hands. "If you don't think I had my own made just like it, you're crazy."

She laughs at that, taking the outfit and starting to pull it on. "Well, it's very soft."

"I know," I say, unzipping my own dress and reaching for some soft clothes myself. "Plus, we get to have the same name now, officially. Isn't that cool?"

"Oh," she says, going a bit still, realizing it. "Oh wow, for the first time in our lives," she says, laughing. "Sisters in name in addition to genetics and friendship."

I grin at her, glad she thinks it's as cool as I do, and we both laugh with the pleasure of it.

When we're both changed, I change Rafe into his own pajamas – he fusses a little, wanting to be left in peace, and I murmur my apology before tucking him in again and wheeling the little bassinet into the bedroom with us so that we can wait for Roger and Sinclair to come back.

"What do you think Xander's planning?" I ask, sitting down next to my sister on the new little loveseat that Sinclair and I put at the end of the bed. Considering that we use this room more than we thought we would to entertain our siblings, we needed more places to sit.

"I don't know," Cora says thoughtfully, curling up on her side of the little couch and facing me. "Nothing good, obviously but..." she turns her head to the side, considering. "Well, if you were Xander, what would you do?"

"Go for Rafe?" I posit, glancing down at my peacefully sleeping baby.

"Nah," she says, shaking her head, clearly lost in thought. "I mean, yesterday Sinclair made a very definite move in marking Rafe as his heir. It kind of makes that option null to Xander."

"What do you mean?" I ask, frowning.

"Well," she says, looking at me evenly, "even if he were to...take out Sinclair," she says

slowly, and I my eyes go wide even at the hypothetical thought. She moves on quickly. "Either way," Cora continues, "Rafe is already Sinclair's heir to his throne. There's no way for Xander to really claim Rafe as his own now as part of Xavier's line. Rafe's thoroughly a Sinclair, just like us. If Rafe inherits, the people who would be his obvious guardians would be you, and Henry, and Roger."

"And you," I say, reaching out a foot to nudge her on the knee, insisting she include herself.

She waves a hand at me, dismissing the idea, but I grin and nudge her again, letting her know that she's in this whether she likes it or not.

But still, I take her point. "So," I say softly, "you think he's doing something else?"

"I do," she says softly, her eyes un-focusing a little as she accesses the strategic part of her mind. "I think that while Xander hasn't made it easy, the Sinclairs have successfully countered every move that he's made. We've got him on the run, and now he's embarrassed himself in front of everyone at a public event."

I nod, understanding that Xander really has been worked into a corner. He's got very few resources left, and if he's realizing as we perhaps have that the Atalaxians have brought him here less as an important player and more as a pawn that they can use to spark a war?

Xander may be realizing that his time and power is running short.

So, he's scrambling.

"So, what would he do?" I wonder aloud, considering it.

"I think he'd...grasp at whatever straws are left to him," Cora says softly, clearly thinking it through as she speaks. "He'd grab at whatever he thought was rightfully his, whatever he can hoard to make himself stronger."

"But he's lost his home here, and his rights – we'd have him arrested, if the Atalaxians weren't claiming him."

"So, what does he have left..." Cora says on a sigh, looking up at the ceiling as she racks her brain.

And I think hard as well, considering all the things that Xander has lost. I mean, he was once in Roger's position the Duke, the brother to a powerful King. And he lost all of that. He made an bold play to get it back – planning to get me pregnant and steal the child, using Rafe to retake the throne but...

Cora's right. We turned away his plan there. And then he lost his connection to the Dark Lord's priests when Sinclair and Roger killed them all, and his home when we made him run from it, and his servants when...

But suddenly, I go quite, quite pale.

"Cora..." I breathe, my eyes going wide as I look up at her.

"What," she says, her breath starting to come quick as she realizes that I've figured something out. I shake my head. "Jessica, and Sarah," I say, starting to panic myself.

I mean, we haven't seen them for days as soon as I found out that Xander was here I told them and Sarah let me know, politely, that they wouldn't be attending any of the events to which they were of course invited, but instead sticking to their little suite of rooms to avoid seeing him.

But me – of course, idiot me – threw it in Xander's face that I knew them, that I helped them

And – and it probably wouldn't take much at all for him to have done a little searching, a little casual chatter with the staff to learn that a young woman and her sister, refugees, were staying here in the palace

"We have to tell Roger and Sinclair," Cora says, jumping to her feet immediately, striding for the closet so she can get her phone and call her mate-

But before she can get there, a scream splits the air outside.

My head whips towards the window, my mouth falling open.

Because that was high pitched, shrill –

The sort of sound that would come from an eight-year-old girl.

Chapter 450 – Kidnap

Cora spins to look at me, her eyes wide, and together we both run for the window. Cora gets there first, unhooking the latch and throwing the window open, bending out so that she can see. I lean out too, my eyes scanning the ground below.

My gaze locks, instantly, on the action.

A man one whose figure and face I've glared at too many times in the past few days – drags a small girl by the hand. He has his arm wrapped around the waist of a woman. She fights against him, but her movements are sluggish.

“He's got them,” I say, grim, and then I look to the side at my sister, determined. “Tell Sinclair. Stay with the baby.”

Cora stares at me for a second and then her eyes go round with shock. “Ella,” she says, reaching out for me, Ella, what -”

But I've already turned back to the window, and before I can even think about what I'm doing, I transform into my wolf and surge out.

I hear my sister scream my name behind me, but I'm already gone, leaping from my narrow window ledge to the next below us, and then another, steadily working my way down the palace wall as fast as I my paws can carry me. The majority of my concentration is on aiming my jumps and ensuring that I land in the right spot, my wolf's instincts taking over, but a little part of my mind is suddenly grateful that my wolf is small and nimble.

Sinclair, with his gigantic wolf, would never be able to balance on these small ledges, and neither would Roger.

Instead, my smaller rose-gold wolf makes quick of the vertical surface of the palace wall and darts towards the ground. The girl screams again as my paws hit the flagstones of the courtyard and I'm already moving across them towards the man who drags the woman and the girl away.

As I bolt across the courtyard towards them, I see from my periphery that I am not the only one to respond – palace guards begin to converge, their guns raised, but they hesitate when they see that Xander will not make it easy for them to take aim on him without risking Sarah and Jessica.

And the guards hesitate further when my snarl rips through the air, a steady order that clearly says he's mine.

The guards fall back just a little, probably thinking that their King isn't going to like it very

much that they let me take the lead. But my authority brooks no compromise: I mean it.

This is my fight, and I won't let them take it from me. Xander spins when he hears my snarl, looking first above my head as if he was looking for a larger wolf. Then his eyes fall, meeting mine, and he has the gall to laugh.

"A she-wolf?" he says, his voice thick with derision. Xander yanks Jessica closer to him and Sarah struggles anew, though her movements are slow. I focus on her for a moment, noticing blood on her forehead, in her hair, and realizing that Xander has hurt her – somehow – to make this escape possible.

Xander holds fast to both of them, and despite their struggles and his older age, he's still a wolf. He is stronger, innately, and his determination to take what is his is steel.

I growl again, prowling closer, my demand that he let them go is clear in my narrowed wolf's eyes, my bared fangs. Xander just scoffs at me, beginning to turn away. "You cannot touch me, she-wolf," he snarls. "I will rip you to shreds."

A louder snarl tears from between my teeth, letting Xander know that that's precisely what I intend to do to him.

He spins again to me and then, vicious, he hurls Sarah to the ground and kicks her hard in the ribs. I hear bone crack and she moans, curling up, shuddering on the ground. I yelp, moving towards her, knowing that she's badly hurt –

But before I can take more than a step, Xander pulls Jessica hard against him and pulls a knife from his pocket, pressing it to her throat. "A step closer," he growls, "and I will kill her, she-wolf. You can keep the old one – I have no more use for her. But this one?" he says, looking down at Jessica and running a lecherous hand down her cheek, "I had her bred special for me, just to my tastes. And I will take her."

A growl rumbles in me and from the corners of my eyes I see the palace security creating a circle around us. My muscles go tense, because I know that Xander sees it too, and I know he sees that his chances of escape are waning.

But a man like Xander, who is already on the run, playing his last card? That won't cow him. It will just make him desperate.

And if he knows we're going to take him out, he may do his best to leave as much collateral damage in his wake as he can. His knife, now, is pressed tight against a little girl's throat.

So, I do the only thing I can.

I transform back into my human form and hold my hands out placatingly.

“Don’t do anything you’ll regret, uncle,” I say quietly. “If you give the girl to me now, we will give you a fair trial.”

“You have nothing with which to negotiate,” he says, backing away, and Jessica cries out as he pulls her with him, reaching out her hands to me in a way that makes my heart twist with fear. Xander wraps his fingers in her hair, tugging hard and making her shriek, but her hands drop as she goes with him. “She is mine, and I will take her. Now, call off your dogs,” he growls, tipping his head towards the guards on either side of us.

I hesitate, suddenly wishing I had Cora’s mind or Sinclair’s strength because –

Because, damn it, I don’t know what to do.

I take a step forward, not wanting Xander to put more distance between us, and his eyes narrow, his hand pressing the knife even tighter. So I counter, seeking to placate him, raising my hands on either side and shouting an order for the guards to lower their guns. My eyes flash to Sarah, who lays on the flagstones to my left, breathing softly and whimpering in pain.

Good, I think, alive. And then I refocus on Xander, who continues to slowly back away from me. For every step he takes, I take one step closer.

“Stop,” he growls, his eyes fully focused on me, angry. “Stop following me, you worthless girl – let me pass -”

I see, quite suddenly, that all of his attention is on me in this moment. That I’m pissing him off enough by continuing to step after him that he doesn’t notice the end of the courtyard behind him and the wide set of stairs that follow. If I can just...keep him distracted...

“No,” I say softly, not pushing him enough to do anything to Jessica but wanting his attention here, on me. “You don’t control me, Xander. No matter how much you’ve tried, I’ve defied you at every turn.”

“You did nothing,” he hisses, steadily moving backwards, three steps from the stairs now –

“I didn’t have to,” I murmur, taking one step forward myself. “I had the right friends in place – my sister, my mate -”

“Your sister,” he spits, laughing.” That human bitch – ”

He takes one more step back. Only two steps left...

The insult rankles in me, but I don't let it get far. I take another step forward, a larger one this time. God, it's so close, I have to time this just right...

Xander reacts as I hoped he would, taking another step back, a big one, big enough that his next step will land just on the edge...

Chapter 451 – On the Edge

Ella

My eyes flick to Jessica's to find her gaze already on me. I stare at her, hoping she can intuit, hoping she has the courage to run when –

“If you think my human sister is a bitch,” I say, taking another precise step forward, forcing Xander to rise his foot to take his final step back. As that foot falls, I bare my teeth. “Then just wait until you really meet me.”

And as Xander places that foot down, and it falls on the edge of the stair that he didn't know was there, I bare my teeth and transform in a flash.

Xander's foot slips and slides unsteadily to the step below, unbalancing him. He flings out an arm to balance himself and while he keeps one hand steadily on Jessica –

As I hoped, the hand he flings out for balance is the one that holds the knife.

The moment she feels the cold press of it leave her neck, Jessica screams and rips herself away from Xander. His hand is still knotted in her hair and I swear I hear it rip from her scalp as I leap for him, but I can't turn and see

Instead, I'm already in the air in my wolf's body, sailing for him, my teeth bared. His eyes are wide as my paws slam into his shoulders, as I take him down to the ground.

A garbled scream falls from his mouth as he whips the knife in his hand toward my side, but it's too late. My teeth are already closing around his throat, digging deep.

The dagger cuts me, I can feel it, but it slides away from my skin to clatter on the ground as Xander's body crashes into the stone steps. My jaws close, my teeth meeting, and instincts take over as I shake my head, ripping the life from him as I tear his flesh.

I feel him go still beneath me quickly, leaving no time for a last gasp or a final word.

I did my job well.

My chest heaving, I stand above him for a moment, looking down into his face, making sure his eyes are dead.

And then I disdainfully step away, wanting nothing more to do with him, wanting the taste of his putrid blood out of my mouth.

I transform back into my human body as I continue to stand above him, my shoulders still heaving, and I drag an arm across my face, wiping the blood away from my mouth

with my sleeve as much as I can.

Guards converge around us, shouting orders and I blink suddenly, brought instantly away from my primal instincts to protect and back to my reality, where I'm standing above a dead man on the palace's steps.

My first thought is for Jessica, and I turn, seeking her –

But suddenly, I see flashes ahead of me and turn wide-eyed back to the stairs. Because I realize with quick horror that while I concentrated only on Xander, and Jessica, and the guards...

That this is still a palace in the middle of a city on a night when we hosted a very large party.

And that the stairs ahead of me are crowded with people who look at me in shock. And press, who snap pictures of their Queen covered in blood.

There is a momentary pause when I panic and stare out at the flashing cameras, but then suddenly – quite suddenly – everything is chaos. An arm grabs me and I look up into Conner's face, blinking in surprise to see him there

And I turn when I hear Jessica's voice, screaming her sister's name

"I have to get to Sarah," I say on a gasp, knowing that she needs to be healed.

"You have to get inside, Luna," Conner says, his voice worried. I tug at his arm but he won't let me go, so I glare up at him. "Seriously, Ella," he says, his voice low as he whispers his words, "you're covered in blood, and the Alpha is going to flip out if he sees you here like this -"

"But she -"

"She's breathing," he says, nodding to me, "she's conscious – let us take her inside, you can heal her there -"

And I look up at him, blinking a little, and then I nod, agreeing to it, realizing that he's right. Because I am panicking right now, and trying to do everything at once, and completely forgetting that I'm a Queen and not some vigilante who can just do what she wants

Conner, seeing that I understand, nods once to me and then stands straight, supporting me as I step away from Xander's lifeless form. Conner's hand is still supportively around my arm as we begin to stride towards the entrance to the palace.

“Jessica!” I shout, seeing that the girl is scared and struggling against the guards who hold her back from her sister, at whose side medics are already gathering.

Jessica whips her head to me, her eyes scared.

“Come with me!” I command, holding out my free hand. The guards hesitate but then let the girl go as they see my serious face. Jessica rushes to my side, wrapping her hand in mine, whimpering in fear as she does.

I pull her close to my un-cut side, wrapping my arm around her. “The doctors are going to bring Sarah in,” I say quietly, “don’t worry, all right? I’ll keep you safe.”

“Do you,” she says, looking back, “do you promise she’s all right?”

“I promise, Jessica,” I say quietly, meaning every word of it. “We just all need to get inside, okay? And Sarah needs people to lift her, and you and I?”

We’re too little for that. The doctors – they’re going to help bring her in.”

Jessica nods shakily, pressing herself closer to my side, but she trusts me and lets me guide her to the door.

We’re almost there when suddenly a large form fills it, and my knees go almost shaky with relief as I instantly recognize my mate.

I want to throw myself in his arms, but I’ve got Jessica with me now know that I can’t. Not yet. and I

Conner removes his hand from me now, knowing that I’m safe, and he steps back as Sinclair takes a step forward, his face livid and scared and breathless all at once.

“Ella,” he growls, stepping close to me and glancing momentarily down at Jessica and over at Conner, assessing them as threats in his panic.

But I reach up and place my hand on his cheek, shaking my head. “I’m fine, it’s fine,” I say, nodding fervently.

He releases a slow and steady breath. The rage and fear still burns in him, I know, but it’s tempered now with the knowledge that I’m okay. He opens his mouth to say more but I nod down at the little girl.

“We need to get her in,” I say, my eyebrows going up.

He hesitates, wanting to storm out and assess the situation, wanting simultaneously – I know – to yell at me for taking whatever risk it was that I just took

But he masters himself, glares at me a little, and nods as he realizes that I'm right. And then the King steps behind Jessica and I and escorts us into the palace.

We move quickly through the halls, heading immediately for our rooms, where we know we'll be safe and I'll feel more at peace, with my mate and my baby and my family all near. Conner comes with us, briefing Sinclair on the details as we walk. I keep a hand on Jessica's shoulder, not wanting to be separated from her for an instant.

"Sarah needs to be brought to us," I say to Sinclair, who still glares at me but nods once. He, in turn, looks over his shoulder at another of his guards and nods to him, letting him know to pass the order around. Then we all move steadily through the halls towards our room.

We get there quickly, luckily not passing many people in the halls who would see poor Jessica's tear-stained face or my bloody face and clothing. But when I press open the door, Cora's appalled gasp is enough to make up for it.

"Ella!" she shouts, dashing over to me and throwing her arms out, clearly wanting to wrap them around me, to hold me and make sure I'm okay.

"Cora, no!" I gasp, stepping back. She hesitates and I gesture towards her pretty new sweatsuit. "Cora you're all in white -"

"Oh my god," she mutters, burying her face in her hands. "You're so ridiculous, Ella – I can't believe that's what you're worried about –"

"Jessica," I say, getting down on one knee as Sinclair closes the door hard behind us. "Do you remember Cora?" I ask, pointing up at my sister.

Jessica looks up at Cora and nods.

"She's a doctor," I say, hoping the words are reassuring. "She's going to have a look at you, all right? Make sure you don't have any bumps and bruises that we need to fix. And while she does that, I'm going to go get changed into something cleaner, okay?"

Jessica hesitates, clearly not wanting to be separated from me, but then nods shakily as Cora reaches out a hand.

"Come on, kid," Cora says with a smile, tugging Jessica away. "Does anything on your body hurt?" Cora asks as she leads Jessica over to where Roger stands with wide, scared eyes, not understanding what's going on. Relief courses through me when I see

Rafe sleeping in his godfather's arms, blissfully unaware of the drama and the violence of the night.

Jessica begins to speak and I loose a long breath, glad that she's in good hands.

And then I look up at my livid mate, and nod once, heading for the bathroom. My heart wrenches to not go immediately to my child, to take him in my arms, but...

Well, I am all bloody. And my mate and I need to talk. Sinclair understands immediately, following me into the bathroom where we can speak privately.

And he slams the door hard behind him.

Chapter 452 – Fallout

Ella

I spin around to face my mate, my hands on my hips, ready to defend myself. But he closes the distance in an instant, taking my face in his hands.

“Are you all right?” he growls, looking down into my face, his eyes quickly moving over my features. My mouth falls open a bit and I blink in surprise. “I’m fine, Dominic.”

“Thank god,” he breathes, wrapping his arms around me and gathering me to him in a tight hug. “I mean, I’m mad as hell, Ella I can’t believe you did that, but -”

“Dominic!” I protest, pulling back a little and frowning up at him. “How could I not have done that!?”

“Are you seriously asking me how you could have not jumped out of the window and attacked a man under the explicit protection of a nation about to take us to war? How you could have just let the palace guards that we hired to protect our people handle it, like they were about to do?”

I narrow my eyes at him, but...well. I also see his point.

Still. I stand by it – every moment of it.

“His life was mine to take,” I say, my voice more of a growl than I intended it to be. “Mine, Dominic. And no – I didn’t do it for vengeance, but he crossed a line tonight, trying to take Sarah and Jessica like he did. Would you have let him live, after he did that?”

Sinclair’s mouth tightens into a thin line. “No,” he says, answering honestly. “I’d have had the guards shoot him, take the shot as soon as they safely could.”

“His death was mine,” I repeat. “If someone was going to take it, I wanted the blood on my hands. And you, of all people, know why.”

Sinclair steps back from me a second, looking down at the man’s blood quite literally all over me. And then he sighs, and shakes his head, and surprises me by starting to tug at my shirt.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“What, would you like to sleep in your blood-soaked clothing, Ella?” He asks, glaring at me a little. “You need a shower, and to get changed.”

“Oh,” I reply, realizing that he’s helping me. And so I take a step back, raising my hands and letting my mate pull my shirt over my head.

“It’s not that I disagree with any of the things you did,” Sinclair says softly as he helps me strip. He pauses and glares at me when he sees the long cut along my side, but I roll my eyes before closing them and accessing my gift. It just takes a second – it’s a scratch, honestly and when I open my eyes I’m all healed up.

I twist so Sinclair can see the skin again smooth and healed. Satisfied, he nods and then moves to the shower, turning the water on so it’s nice and steamy, just how I like it.

“Like I was saying,” he picks up, turning to me again. “I’m not sad to see him go, just...”

“I know,” I say, sighing and stepping into the shower as Sinclair strips his own tuxedo, now likewise stained with my uncle’s blood. “I’m...Queen now. I should have let someone else do it. Should not have...gotten my hands dirty, as it were.”

Quickly, I soap myself down, doing best to keep my hair dry as Sinclair ducks into the closet to grab us both a fresh set of clothes. When he comes back, I’m nearly finished. I rinse myself off as I look at my mate a little guiltily.

“People got pictures, Dominic,” I say quietly, my voice apologetic. “There may have been...press.”

“I’m aware,” he says on a sigh as I turn off the water and step out of the shower. He hands me a towel, looking at me with a blank face. “It will...be what it is. Wolves won’t care about the violence – I think, when the details come out, they’ll understand. Humans, though...”

“I know,” I sigh, glancing at the door as I towel off. “All the good press will we bought with Cora’s wedding...”

He steps close to me then, wrapping an arm around my naked waist and again pulling me flush against him. “We’ll handle it, Ella,” he murmurs, brushing his knuckles down the length of my cheek, and I smile a little up at him.

“You think it’s fixable?”

“I think you’re the Queen,” he says, shaking his head with a little shrug. “No going back now.”

I laugh a little, looking up at him. “That’s not what I asked.”

Gently, Sinclair lowers his face, pressing his lips to mine. “We’ll figure it out,” he

murmurs when he pulls away, just an inch. “Now,” he raises his head more and swats me on the ass, maybe a little harder than necessary, but it just makes me grin. “Get dressed. Let’s go...see what the hell our family thinks.”

I stand on my toes and kiss him again, grateful that he’s on my side. I know that he’s madder than he’s letting on, and that this really is a big deal, but...

Well, it’s good to know that he’s got my back.

I hurriedly get dressed in the soft clothing Sinclair brought in for me, twisting my hair up into a quick bun before stepping into some slippers. When I’m ready, I nod, and Sinclair and I together walk back into our bedroom.

Cora sits on the couch with Jessica by her side, a tablet in her hands. Roger stands next to her, Rafe asleep in his arms. Henry turns his chair towards us as we cross the room.

“Well?” Sinclair asks, nodding down at the tablet. “What’s the verdict?”

Cora looks wide-eyed at both of us. “It’s...not good,” Cora says softly, shaking her head as she concentrates on me. “The press is getting wind, and social media is already going crazy.

Ella, are you – are you all right? Did -”

“I’m fine,” I say, stepping to Roger’s side and reaching for my baby. “But forget about the news. Where is Sarah?”

“Infirmary, downstairs.” Henry reports, smiling kindly at Jessica, who looks around at all of us, worried and confused. “We’ve been getting reports, and the aids are desperate to come in and start making plans for how to handle this but...” he glances up at Roger. “We wanted a moment, to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

“Which is?” Sinclair says, crossing his arms and looking around.

“Full support,” Roger says in an instant. “You did the right thing, Ella,” he says, locking eyes with me and nodding. “I mean, I personally wouldn’t have leapt from the window to do it?” He cocks his head to the side a little here, a smirk pulling at his lips. ”

But Xander crossed the line – he was going to get taken out. It was just a question of who did it.”

“And are we all agreed?” I ask, looking particularly at Cora now.

She blinks up at me. “Wait, why am I being singled out?” she asks.

"Because," I say, shrugging a little. " You're..."

"Human?" she says, raising an eyebrow.

And none of us say anything, because honestly, that's what we're all thinking.

"Ella," Cora says, shaking her head at me. "Just because I'm human doesn't mean a little bit of me isn't pleased to see that man meet his end. Did I wish that that responsibility fell on your shoulders? Probably not. But still," she shrugs, meeting my gaze steadily. "I am on your side, with everyone else.

And I'll defend you to the ends of it."

"Good," I say, looking around. And then I sigh and look at my mate. " Ready?"

"I'll let the aids in," he says, moving towards the door with a nod. "It's going to be a long night."

"Have Sarah sent up too," I call to him, and I wait to see him nod again before I kneel before Jessica, taking her hands. "We're going to bring her here, and I'm going to heal her up, okay? And then the two of you can go back to your rooms, if you'd like."

"Okay," she says, her voice soft and still a little scared.

"Okay, sweetheart," I say, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. As I smile at her, I access my gift a little bit and let it sweep through her, healing the few places on her scalp where Xander hurt her, as well as a few bruises on her body. It isn't much, but I'm glad to help her feel even a little better.

When I move to stand up, though, Jessica tightens her hand. She looks anxiously at Cora, Roger, and Henry, and then quirks her finger at me, asking me to come closer so she can tell me a secret.

I lean in, turning my ear to the little girl.

"Ella, I know I'm supposed to be nice but..."

I nod, encouraging her.

"I hated the Master, Ella. He was always so mean, and we were scared of him always. I'm...I'm glad he's dead. I'm glad you did it."

I breathe out a deep breath and then move a way a little, locking eyes with the little girl

and nodding deeply. "Me too, Jess," I say, squeezing her hand tight and giving her a big smile. "It wasn't nice but...well," I shrug and let my shoulders fall with a sigh. " Sometimes, when people aren't good to us? We don't have the choice but to stop being nice."

And she gives me a little smile, and I return it tenfold.

And then I get to my feet, ready to face whatever consequences come for me. Because that approval, from this little girl who has suffered under Xander far more than I have?

It's more than I need.

I will stand by the actions that I took tonight and never, not once, publicly apologize for them. I did it for me, but I did it for Jessica too, and all the little girls like her.

And even if the press tears me to shreds, I know in my heart: I'm fighting for the girls who have never had someone to fight for them.

Girls like Jessica, and Sarah, and Cora and me, when we were small.

And I'll do it all again in a heartbeat.

Chapter 453 – Press

Ella

We stayed up all night working and strategizing. A flurry of aids came into the room right away as well as several guards, who worked with Sinclair to brief him and to begin to come up with a plan about how to handle the press.

I trusted my mate to handle that, though, focusing my attention singularly on Sarah when she was wheeled into the room on a hospital gurney. Sarah was conscious, but in a great deal of pain, and Cora and I moved immediately to her side. Cora asked questions of both the attendant doctor and Sarah herself as I handed Rafe to Henry.

When Cora quickly briefed me that the wounds, as far as she could tell, were nothing that I hadn't handled before, I nodded to her and quickly took Sarah's hand. "I'd like to heal you, Sarah, if you'll let me," I said quietly, looking her in the eye.

She laughed a little, shaking her head at me. "Go ahead," she said with an attempt at a grin that immediately fell away as she winced, favoring her side where Xander kicked her.

I exhaled sharply, hating that he put her in pain again, and that I was the cause of it. But, eager to be the solution as much as I could, I closed my eyes and concentrated, accessing my gift and healing my friend.

The work was done quickly and barely twenty minutes later I opened my eyes to see Sarah staring at me in awe. "

That's...incredible," she said. "I mean, I watched you work on Jessica, but feeling it?"

"Better?" I asked, and she had just laughed, marveling a little.

Things moved quickly then, with Sinclair glancing over at me meaningfully, indicating that he had things he wanted to run my way. I nodded to him but turned first to Sarah and Jessica to ensure that they got settled. When they hesitated about going back to their rooms tonight Xander had, after all, kidnapped them from that space I insisted they take one of the personal rooms in the back of Sinclair and my personal quarters one of the rooms that we hope to one day fill with our children.

They had smiled at this idea, wanting to be close, and Cora took Jessica by the hand as Sarah lifted herself from the gurney and walked away, completely free of pain.

"Wow," the attendant doctor had said, his eyes wide. "What did you..."

"Another time," I had sighed, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We should talk but..."

another time?”

He smiled at me, still a little shocked and awed, but he agreed and quietly left the room. I sighed then, and took the baby back from Henry before moving to Sinclair's side, ready to face whatever was next.

We were up until about...three in the morning I guess, preparing press releases and dealing with all the details. By the end I had tucked Rafe away into his little crib and fallen into bed exhausted. I had always thought it was an exaggeration when people say they fell asleep before their head hit the pillow, but as I have absolutely no memory of laying my head down?

I guess they weren't exaggerating after all.

I groan a little as I roll over in bed now and glance at the clock. My groan only deepens when I see that it's only 7 am.

Four hours of sleep – that's... Appalling.

“Morning, little Queen,” I hear my mate rumble beside me and I turn towards him with a frown on my face, noting the tablet on his lap.

“Dominic,” I murmur, working to sit up. “Did you sleep at all!”

“A little,” he says, reaching out a hand to stroke over my hair. “I wish you'd slept more. What got you up?”

“Anxiety, I guess,” I say, moving myself closer to him and nodding towards the tablet. “What are they saying now?”

Last night, the news had gone pretty wild with everything, playing all kinds of footage from the event me racing across the flagstones in my wolf's body, me negotiating with Xander while he pressed a knife to Jessica's throat, me leaping through the air again in my wolf's form with my teeth bared, me looking wide-eyed out into the crowd with blood all down my front

It had been...a frenzy, honestly, with no one really knowing what was going on or how to react. Sinclair had been right – a lot of people, particularly humans, were upset with what they called the “wanton violence” displayed by wolf kind. And while the words were levied at both Xander and at me...

Well, the sight of a newly crowned Queen covered in a man's blood while his corpse laid at her feet? It wasn't... great.

"I think," Sinclair says, a smile on his lips, "you're going to be...pleasantly surprised." He passes the tablet to me.

"What?" I frown at him, confused, but he nods to the tablet and I look down at it.

The baby fusses a little, passing a little pulse of need down the bond and I hesitate but Sinclair gets up, heading toward Rafe's crib and letting me focus. So, I sigh and concentrate, frowning as I read the headline at the top of the page.

A Queen for the People, it reads. My frown deepens.

What? What is this? My eyes move down a little and I blink in surprise to see that I recognize the byline: the article is written by Tempest Bowers, the woman I met last night, whose daughters just wanted some chocolate...

My mouth falls open a little as I begin to read because...

The article, as a whole, is a rather stunning defense of my actions last night. And Tempest?

She's done her homework.

My eyes fly over the tablet, seeing all the details of my life plainly laid out for the readers, wondering how the hell Tempest figured all this out and further how she got it all done by seven in the morning. But as I continue to read, and see the number of people that she interviewed...

I realize that Tempest? She's probably been working on this for a long time.

"Clever lady," I murmur, shaking my head as I read through the article. She starts by addressing the violence of last night, with all of the details about Xander's death at my hands, not shying away from any of it. Indeed, I come away in the first paragraphs looking...well, precisely as we thought humans might see me: a cold-blooded murderer, over-reacting to a situation that deserved more diplomacy.

But then Tempest continues to spin out the story, including all the details of how Xander knew I was his niece but abandoned me to be raised in an orphanage, only to find me years later and violate my body and my privacy by having me impregnated with the sperm of his choice. She continues to focus on Xander only for a few short paragraphs, detailing his politics and his forced subjection of Sarah, and Jessica, and their mother.

But then, to my surprise, the story turns again to me. It's a love story, really, of how Sinclair and I found each other despite Xander's plans and fell in love, how hard we worked to rid this nation of Damon – who honestly wouldn't have been much better than

Xander himself. She even tells of Xander's attempt to kidnap Rafe, and then all the work I did in the refugee camps to help people who really need me.

There are some guesses in there, and hints, about the magic I wield, which was never precisely a secret even if it's not common knowledge. I smirk to see how well she's begun to guess at what, precisely, I am able to do with my powers. She doesn't go so far as to say I'm a magical all-healing Queen, but she does detail the incredible number of people – especially children – who walked away from the refugee camps entirely healed of dreadful injuries and diseases.

In the end, Tempest returns to the question of what I did last night, and carefully asks the reader to reconsider the situation. While it may appear at first glance as if a woman brutally murdered an old man, Tempest ends by asking: "what side, really, would have your Queen take? I, for one, might prefer a fierce Queen who doesn't wait to let bureaucracy handle serial abusers who attempt to kidnap little girls, but who instead tears their throats out and ends the issue there. Ella Sinclair isn't a politician, she's a woman who fights for her people, and heals them too. At least, those who deserve it."

"Damn," I say, lowering the tablet to my lap and looking up at Sinclair, who smirks down at me with the baby in his arms. I reach for Rafe, knowing he needs to be fed. "I mean, are people... reading this? Do they believe her?"

"Shared on social media over a million times in the hour since it's been published," Sinclair says, happily handing the baby to me. I smile down at Rafe, tugging up my shirt and preparing to feed him, but Sinclair places my a soft hand beneath my chin. I look up at him.

"People are seeing you, Ella, for what you truly are," he says quietly. "I'm glad for that, and grateful. But I knew, eventually, that they would."

I smile up at him, my eyes shining a bit with my tears. "Do you really think so?" I ask, shaking my head, marveling a bit.

Slowly, he nods, a grin taking over his face. "Thanks to Tempest Bowers, they're seeing it faster than I thought they might." He stands up, running a hand through his hair. "She really helped us out here, with this article."

I laugh a little, turning my attention back to Rafe when he gives a hungry little squeak of protest. I quickly get him started, sighing a little when I feel him latch. Then, I look back up at my mate.

"Well? What do you send the woman who has single-handedly saved your reputation?" I ask, grinning at him. "Like, a fruit basket?"

Chapter 454 – The Threat of War

Ella

We're able to see the true fallout of Xander's death as the next few days pass, which are...more stressful than I'd like them to be. Cora, luckily, stays at my side through most of it, knowing that I need her support.

"Well," she says, lounging in bed with me and flicking through her phone " you'll be happy to know that incidents of people calling you a hero outweigh those calling you a murderer three to one by this point!"

I sigh and throw a pretzel at my sister, giving her a little glare that she returns with a grin. Both of us are lounging around in pajamas because Sinclair has asked me not to leave our suite until things calm down a bit. Rafe lays peacefully in the blankets between us, gurgling and grabbing at his toes.

"Don't tease me," I murmur. "You know I hate this."

"You need to get over it, Ells," Cora murmurs, returning her attention to her phone. "You care way too much about what people think about you. You did what you did for everyone's good. People just love to have someone to dogpile on. And like I said, there are way more people on your side than those who are against you, so I think it's all turning out nicely."

"Easy for you to say," I sigh. "You're the martyred duchess whose wedding I ruined."

"I know," she says, flashing me a wicked grin. "No one's saying anything bad about me, the poor innocent duchess!"

I growl a little and toss another pretzel at her, satisfied when this one bounces off of her head.

Both of us turn towards the door when it opens though, and twin smiles light our faces when both Sinclair and Roger come in.

"Hey!" Cora calls, sitting up and waving to her mate. "Welcome to the slumber party!"

"I'm jealous," Roger says as he and Sinclair cross to us. Roger easily slides onto the bed next to Cora, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "You three look so comfortable. And cozy."

"Yeah well," I mutter, leaning against Sinclair as he settles on the bed behind me and drops a kiss to my cheek before leaning forward to tickle Rafe's belly. The baby giggles eagerly, which makes me smile, just a little. "You wouldn't be so happy about it, Roger, if

you were forced to be cozy because you're on house arrest. Or suite arrest. Or whatever."

"Well, Ella," Roger says, looking at me with wide, innocent eyes, a wicked grin starting on his mouth. "I mean, you could always, you know, leap out the window if you're feeling too contained

Cora bursts into laughter as I throw a pretzel at Roger now, hard. But he just snatches it out of the air and pops it into his mouth, grinning at me.

"Settle, settle," Sinclair says with a sigh, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me close against him. He rubs his cheek warmly against my head and passes a great deal of warmth and love down the bond, knowing that I need it. It hasn't been easy on me, these past few days. Even if Tempest article did a great deal of work to shine the truth on the situation?

Well, I know that it's rather an understatement that I've been living up to my nickname.

"Ready for your update, trouble?" Sinclair asks, planting a kiss on my cheek. "Or do we need to bring you more snacks first, so you have something to temper the anxiety?"

"Just tell me," I sigh, popping another pretzel in my mouth. I have indeed been snacking a lot these past few days. Anxious eating has never really been my thing but...well, I've never been the focus of international attention before, have I?

"All right. The justice systems have decided not to press charges against you, calling you a political agent and a technical extension of the military. Since Xander was a war criminal and was actively committing a violent crime that would have resulted in an order to use lethal force to stop him, your actions have been marked as an extension of that order."

"Wow," Cora says, her eyebrows going up. "How the hell did you manage that?"

"It took some doing," Roger says, "dad was behind a lot of it. But, as a result, the role of Queen has been officially marked as a military and political figure in this nation, which is... pretty cool."

"I got lucky," I mutter, looking down at the blankets and sighing, feeling guilty.

"You didn't," Sinclair says, giving me a nudge. I look up at him, meeting his frown with my own. "It's right, Ella. The Queen should have political and military power in the nation if the King does, and no one who truly understands this situation believes that you did anything wrong. All right? So stop blaming yourself."

I shake my head at him, giving another sigh. "You're not telling me everything," I say, knowing that I'm right.

And Sinclair grimaces, which just makes me groan and lay down on the bed next to my baby. I close my eyes and breathe in Rafe's sweet baby scent as he reaches out a pudgy little hand and grasps at my cheek, making me smile just a little bit. "Go on," I say, my eyes still closed. "Let's have the whole story."

I hear Sinclair sigh again before he begins. "The Atalaxians, as we guessed are... displeased."

"Understatement," Roger adds, his voice dry.

"They're...using this so-called offense as a rationale to go to war."

"What?" I hear Cora breathe, shocked, and my own eyes fly open. "Does this mean," my sister asks, hesitating, "that...that we're at war?"

"Not yet," Sinclair says, his voice serious. "They haven't declared war. They're just saying that this is an offense worthy of it. It's...a bullshit move, and everyone knows it – Xander is barely their citizen. But they're taking advantage of it, trying to back us into a corner so that we give them whatever they want in exchange for not going to war."

My lips draw into a thin line as I stare at my little baby, my sweet Rafe, wondering what his future holds.

War.

War is the last thing I want for our world right now, for Rafe's future.

And yet, somehow, I'm at the heart of it.

I rack my brain, wondering if there was anything I could have done to stop it...

"Don't," Sinclair murmurs, reaching out a warm hand that settles on my hip. I look up at him as he shakes his head. "It's not your fault Ella. It would have happened no matter what."

"Do you think that's true?" I ask, holding my mate's gaze. "I mean, Prince Calvin confirmed as much, the night of the wedding. That the Atalaxians encouraged Xander that night so he would overstep. Was this a setup from the start?"

"Is that what that Prince said?" Cora asks, fascinated.

I turn a little so I can see her and I nod, confirming it.

“That’s so...odd...” Cora says, her voice wondering.

“Why?” Sinclair asks, and I sit up, because I want to be able to easily look between them now.

“Because,” Cora says, her mind clearly working through it. “If that was their plan all along, to force your hand, then why on earth would Calvin tell you it? It gives you all the power to point it out – to pass the blame back to them.”

“Well, we don’t have any proof,” I say, giving a little shrug. “It was just...a personal conversation. Nothing written, nothing recorded.”

“Still,” she says, looking at Sinclair now with a little frown. “It is...odd. Either there’s something else going on here? Where like, the Atalaxians want you to think that they set you up? Or, more simply...”

She cocks her head to the side, confused.

Sinclair finishes for her. “...that the Prince is up to something else,” he murmurs, his voice quiet, considering.

“Who is this guy?” Roger asks, leaning forward, curious.

And bizarrely, almost as if in answer to the question, a knock comes at the door.

Sinclair calls for whoever it is to come in, and an aid peeks through the door with an odd look on her face.

“A note,” she says, holding out a little envelope. “For the Queen.”

Sinclair stands and moves over to the aid, taking the note from her hands. “Who is it from?” he asks, turning the paper over in his hands.

“From...Prince Calvin of Atalaxia,” the woman says.

We all go a bit still at that moment. Then Sinclair thanks the aid, dismissing her, and slowly crosses the room to hold the envelope out to me.

“Well, Ella?” he says as I take it.”

What does your Prince have to say for himself now?”

Chapter 455 – Ella Gets a Note

Ella

I snatch the note out of my mate's hand, muttering "he's not my prince," but no one really acknowledges the words as I tear the envelope open and eagerly read the short letter inside. When I see what it says, my eyebrows arch almost to my hairline.

"What is it?" Cora asks, leaning eagerly forward.

"He wants to...go to dinner," I say, frowning a little.

"Dinner," Sinclair says, frowning and sliding his hands into his pockets. "

Why on earth would he want that? We have three more dinners with the Atalaxians scheduled over the next few nights, he could go to any one of those

"No, Dominic," I say softly, looking up at him. "The note is only addressed to me."

My mate goes still as my words, and their implications, sink in. And then his face goes dark.

"Okay!" Roger says in too-cheerful tones, wrapping his hands around Cora's arms as he stands up, dragging her with him. "Time for us to go! It's been a pleasure, Dom – we'll see you later – "

"What?" Cora gasps, fumbling to her feet and looking between Roger and me. "No, I want to stay!"

"Nope!" he says, moving her hastily for the door. "We're out of here!"

"Roger, I'm in pajamas – "

"If you don't kill anyone, Cora, no one will care what you're wearing -"

My eyes follow my protesting sister as Roger pulls her from the room, shutting the door behind them. And then my eyes snap up to my mate who glowers silently down at me, the only sounds in the room our little baby happily cooing next to us.

"You know I didn't do this, Dominic," I say, my voice stern as I slowly start to shake my head at him.

"I didn't say you did, Ella," he snaps, his voice a low snarl. But he's pissed – I can tell by the stiffness of his shoulders, the tense set of every single one of his muscles.

I move slowly, not wanting to set him off. I mean, I'm not scared, not at all I didn't do anything wrong to begin with, and he'd never hurt me. But still, I don't want him to lose his temper, not when he's clearly working so hard to contain it.

So, quite calmly, I reach for the baby and gather him close to my chest before standing up and moving to my mate's side.

"What do you want me to do?" I ask, my voice perfectly calm. Because...

I mean, honestly? Even if I only ever admit it to myself? I want to go. I'm not only eager to make a connection with the only Atalaxian who has even hinted that he might want to build bridges between our nations, but even more than that?

There is some kind of connection between Calvin and I and I'm dying to know what it is. I want very much to go to this dinner and find out more.

But Sinclair – he's my mate. And he is about ready to tear this man apart for asking me to dinner – especially because Sinclair thinks that he's into me or whatever.

As Sinclair stares down into my face, I can tell all of these thoughts are rushing through his mind as well. But then he loses his breath and wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me close to him as he softly raises a hand to my cheek. "What do you want to do?"

But I shake my head, not letting him get out of it that easily. "I am your Queen, Dominic," I say quietly. "I am done taking things into my own hands for now. If you want me to go, and to see what I can do to make a connection with Atalaxia, or if I can learn anything new from him, I'll do it. But if you want me to stay?" I shrug. "I'll stay."

He growls a little, his arm tightening, and even though I know he's upset I can't help but smile a little. I like it when he's possessive like this. Warmth coils within me, heating me from the inside out.

Sensing that heat, Sinclair moves his thumb to my mouth, tracing the line of my lower lip with the edge of his finger.

"Let me think on it," he murmurs.

"What's there to think about?" I ask softly, genuinely curious.

"The pros and cons," he answers, taking a deep sniff of my scent, apparently relishing it, "of ripping him to shreds for daring to ask you out on a date."

I burst out laughing here, earning a little smile from my mate. "Dominic," I say, shaking

my head at him, "it's not a date -"

"Then why didn't he invite me?"

"Because every time you talk to him you get all growly!" I say, laughing. "I'm nice to him, which is beneficial for international relations!"

"Well," Sinclair murmurs, snapping his teeth at me a little, "maybe you should be a little less nice to him."

I shake my head up at him, stepping closer to that my body lines as flush as it can against his with the baby in my arms. "First you tell me that you'd prefer I didn't kill the enemies, now you're telling me not to be nice? Honestly, Dominic, mixed messages over here -"

"How about," he murmurs, moving his hand from my face and slipping it to my shoulder and then down my back, "you just stay in bed, all the time? Then no foreign princes will ever hit on you, and I'll get a great deal more peace

I laugh again, raising myself onto my tiptoes and tilting my chin up, silently begging for a kiss and sending a little pulse of love and desire down our bond. Sinclair growls in response and lowers his mouth to mine, kissing me roughly, claiming me as his. I open my mouth to him, eagerly giving into it, letting him know that I'm his-his-his-

The kiss deepens and I'm a little frantic suddenly, wondering how to simultaneously get the baby to his crib while continuing to kiss my mate, because no part of me wants to break away any time soon

But Sinclair groans, and lifts his face from mine, even though I'm still pressed tight to him.

"I can't," he sighs, panting a little as he looks down at me.

"What!?" I say, aghast.

He shakes his head, glancing over at a clock. "I'm already late, Ella - we've got more negotiations with the Atalaxians, and I have to find Roger -" he rolls his eyes and glances towards the door, "who the hell knows where he went..."

I pout up at my mate, disappointed. "Fine," I say, my voice a little mean. "But you owe me, all right?"

Sinclair laughs, taking my chin possessively between his fingers and shaking his head at me. "Tonight, trouble. I'll make it up to you tenfold."

I sigh but step away, disappointed but knowing that it's necessary to be patient, even though patience has never been one of my strong suits. I glance over at the bed, where the invitation sits discarded.

Sinclair follows my gaze and we're both silent for a moment, looking at it.

"Do you want me to reply to that?" I ask quietly.

"No," he responds, and I look up to see him shaking his head. Then he leans forward and kisses me again, softly, just for a moment. "Let that bastard wait. I'll be seeing him this afternoon anyway – maybe I'll get a better idea of what he wants. Are you all right with that?"

"I am if you are," I say, meaning every word.

And my mate kisses me again, and then drops a kiss to our baby's head before murmuring his goodbyes and heading again out of the room, off to his King's business.

I sigh more deeply this time, looking down at my happy baby. "Just me and you, little meatball," I murmur, smiling at him. Rafe squeals a little in happiness, waving his fists at me, and I laugh.

"You're right," I say, turning back to the bed to flop back down and spend some time with my little guy, "it's not so bad, is it?"

But even as I play with Rafe, my eyes drift over to the discarded invitation on the bed.

And deep down? I hope that whatever Calvin and Sinclair say to each other today means that I get to say yes to that.

Because something at the center of me is urging me to go and speak to this Prince alone, to hear what it is he has to say.

Chapter 456 – Negotiations

Sinclair

I storm down the hallway on my way to the meeting, but I'm gratified to see Roger waiting there for me at the door, leaning against the wall. I nod to him, not breaking my stride, but he falls in with me as we head inside.

"So, what'd you bring?" Roger asks, his voice serious.

"What?" I ask, half turning to him in my confusion.

"To kill the prince," Roger says, his face deadpan. "Like a gun, or something more dramatic like a morning star? Or are you just going to like, tear him limb from limb -"

"Roger," I sigh, shaking my head as I arrive at the head of the table but his face just breaks out into a grin.

"What is it?" our father asks, looking between us. I know that he can tell from my serious face that something's up, and from Roger's joking one that it's well enough under control that we don't need to take major action now.

"Don't worry about it, dad," I murmur, not wanting to get into it with the Atalaxian delegation already filtering into the room.

"Prince Calvin asked Ella on a date," Roger says, leaning close so that dad can hear but speaking loud enough that I know what he said. I sigh deeply, grabbing a packet of papers off the desk and flipping idly through them, making a mental note to beat the crap out of my brother at the earliest opportunity.

"What?" dad says, looking at me with wide eyes.

"It's not like that," I growl, glaring at Roger. "Can we just drop it for now? We've got more important things to worry about."

Dad glares at Roger too, taking my side as the majority of the persons attending this meeting begin to take their seats. Roger laughs a little but comes around to my other side, sinking into the chair on my right while my father takes his place on my left. King Gabriel is here as an advisor on our side, ready to argue staunchly against war, as well as six other pack members from our territories. My eyes scan the room, noting the presence of nine Atalaxian delegates with one empty chair.

Just as an aid begins to close the door, the final delegate appears: Prince Calvin, slipping into the room and heading for his chair without even looking at me.

I glare daggers at him, unable to help it, willing him to look at me, to face me.

But he doesn't raise his eyes.

Inwardly I sigh, because I want him to look at me – I want him to know that I know what the hell he's up to, even if Ella doesn't see it, or pretends she doesn't.

But he's either clever or a coward, because he keeps his eyes down.

So, I move on and begin the meeting by greeting everyone and thanking them for their presence. I express my sincere hopes that we can find a path to peace, stating that neither of our nations will truly benefit from a war. Then, with opening statements behind me, I take my seat, opening the table to conversation from both sides. The conversation is long, and drawn out, and largely unproductive. The Atalaxians are well prepared and clearly seeking war. I sigh inwardly as I start to realize that my suspicions were correct: that they came here wanting war, that they likely hoped Xander would do something to give them a reason to push for it, and now that they've sunk their teeth into it? They're unlikely to give up.

And frankly, it makes a lot of sense for them to want to go to war with us. Atalaxia is a large, conservative nation with deep pockets and excellent military powers. Moon Valley is smaller, and while we have better technology, better strategic location, and a fantastic set of national resources, we've also recently been gutted by civil war.

Damn it, Damon, I think to myself, scowling inwardly. You set us up for this.

Because it's true – Damon's war is what tore us apart, made us a wounded animal ready for Atalaxia to come in for a kill. While they're pretending that they want this war because we've moved against them, everyone knows it's bullshit. No, what Atalaxia really wants is to wipe our nation out, to annex this territory and all of its resources into itself.

Not only would this be strategically and financially profitable for Atalaxia, but it would be an ideological coup as well. A lot of powerful men in that nation have some truly awful ideas about gender and humanity; they would see it as a very personal victory to come to our nation and teach our women, and our humans, their "proper" place in the world.

I grit my teeth as I think about it, the warrior in me wanting to go to war, to wipe the Atalaxians off the face of the earth in turn.

But the King? Who is responsible for his people, and who knows that this nation has nowhere near the resources, currently, to take on this larger force?

Damn it, but I know we'll lose. Or if we even have a shot of winning, that the war will stretch on for years – that, damn it, Rafe might be grown by the time it comes to a close

—

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment as I realize that...that Rafe could even fight in this war, if it goes for as long as I think it could. That if I fail in these negotiations, I could be signing my own son's death warrant on the battlefield

A shudder passes through me and beside me I feel my brother lean closer. It's a very subtle move – he doesn't touch me, or give any indication that he knows what I'm thinking. But still I can tell. He knows that I'm upset, and in his own way he's trying to be there for me, however he can, without letting the Atalaxians see how much they're tearing me up inside.

I take a deep breath, grateful for him.

And suddenly I remember...that Roger knows more than Ella and I do about Rafe's future. That he didn't tell me everything he and Cora saw at the moonlight baptism we asked him not to but he told me that Rafe's life isn't a tragic one, even if it has hard parts.

If my son died young on a battlefield, Roger would have seen it. And the fact that he didn't...

A great deal of relief rushes through me at the thought and I send a prayer up to the Goddess, thanking her both for my brother and her insight, begging her again to keep my child safe.

Because Rafe – in the end, this is all about him, isn't it? About the world in which he'll grow to be a man, about the Kingdom I'll one day hand over to him.

And as I raise my eyes I look directly at Calvin over the table, who I find looking right at me for the first time. Because he has a son too – just about Rafe's age, does he not?

And is this what we're doing? Two men a King and a Prince – choosing to send our sons to war against each other?

Is this really what we want in the world?

Slowly, as if he can read my thoughts, Calvin nods.

And then, to my surprise, he stands up and leaves the room. The man speaking one of the Atalaxian delegates falters in his speech for a moment, clearly confused at Calvin's abrupt departure. And I glare too, because this man-

Well, he's certainly got balls, doesn't he?

Because his message can't be plainer in this moment.

He wants exactly what I want – to save our children from war – but he's not willing to talk to me about it.

No.

For some reason only he understands, Calvin only wants to speak to Ella.

I grit my teeth as I lean back in my chair, watching the Prince leave the room and close the door behind him, glaring a little at the door once he's gone.

This man he's played his hand well, forcing me to put my Queen in play when my strongest instinct is to protect her.

And even though I know that Ella can handle herself? God damn it, but I know something else is at play here – something beyond international relations.

This man? He's got more at stake with my mate.

And I just don't know what the hell it is.

Chatper 457 – Preparations

#Chatper 457-Preparations Ella

I jump almost out of my skin when Sinclair bangs through our bedroom door. I spin with the baby in my arms, my eyes wide. Sinclair's clearly all worked up as he slams the door behind him, his eyes instantly fixed on me, looking me up and down.

"Why are you dressed like that?" he asks, his voice angry, though I can tell that he's not mad at me he's just worked up at what must have been a very stressful day.

"Like what?" I ask, looking down at myself. I'm wearing what I think is my most conservative dress – black, floor length with a little bit of a train behind me, with long sleeves and a crew neck that cuts across my collar bones, showing nothing beneath.

"Well, you look beautiful, Ella," Sinclair bites out, glaring at me a little like it's an accusation.

I blink at him for a moment, my eyebrows raising. "Is that a problem, Dominic?"

"Why are you all dressed up?" he growls, crossing to me.

"I just thought that I'd get ready, in case I am supposed to go to dinner – "

"And you decided to wear that!?"

"Okay," I say, keeping my voice calm and doing my very best to keep my own temper now, because my mate? He's pushing it. I put one hand out, resting it against his chest. "All right, Dominic. I'm going to give you a minute now to rethink your words, and then we'll start again."

He narrows his eyes at me, not liking at all that I'm talking to him like a kindergartener. But I cock my head to the side, asking him to consider the irony that at this moment I need to talk to him like a kindergartener.

After a long moment he sighs and turns away from me, hanging his head and putting his hands on his hips. "I'm sorry," he murmurs, pulling himself together. Then he drops his face in a hand. "It has been a long day, Ella."

"Oh, sweetheart," I murmur, taking a step forward and putting a hand on his back, stroking up and down, wanting to bring him comfort. "Tell me," I say, and my mate turns and puts his arms around me as he tells me all about the meeting.

I sigh when he finishes. "I'm sorry, Dominic," I say, looking up at him. "I know you tried."

He shakes his head, looking down at me with his gorgeous green eyes. "It doesn't matter what I tried – they've already decided."

I nod, understanding, but knowing that he's going to take the blame on himself no matter what logic presents itself.

Then I bite my lip a little, considering. "Does this mean I'm going to dinner?"

He sighs again, more deeply this time and steps away from me, putting a hand on my shoulder and turning me around. I do as his hands tell me to, spinning so that my back is to him, and then I sigh a little as he clasps my zipper in his hands and starts to pull it hastily down.

"Yes," he says, and I sigh in disappointment –

But then I frown, because...wait, what?

"I'm going?" I ask, trying to turn, but my mate holds me still until he has the zipper all the way down to my ass. Then he starts to push at the gown at my shoulders.

"You are," he says. "I already sent word to the Prince, accepting in your stead." A shiver passes through me at the warmth of Sinclair's palms against my shoulders, my upper arms, but

"Well then what are you doing?" I ask, turning and frowning at him even as he tries to stop me. "I'm already dressed! I'm -"

"I'm taking this damn dress off you, Ella," he says, gruff. "Don't you have like, a dirty old sack you can wear? Or a saggy sweatsuit?"

I laugh but I take a step back from him, starting to pull my dress back on. "Dominic! I'm not going to dinner with our enemy looking like a slob. This dress is so matronly -"

"Matronly?" he says, slipping his hands into his pockets and raising a single eyebrow at me. "Ella, I was hard the moment I walked in the door and saw you in that dress –"

"Yeah," I say, waving a dismissive hand, "But that's every dress –"

"Damn right it is," he growls, stepping towards me again, the predator in him coming out.

But this just makes me laugh, as much as it turns me on. Because Sinclair – I like him like this. Maybe we should keep this Atalaxian Prince around if it gets my mate all worked up...

“No, Dominic, I’m wearing this,” I say, struggling to pull my dress back up over my shoulders while I hold the baby.

“Fine,” he says with a little sigh, taking the baby from me. “But take it off anyway. Just for a few minutes.”

“What?” I ask, confused as Sinclair kisses Rafe, murmuring a greeting to him as he carries him over to his little crib and placing him down inside. When that’s done, Sinclair stands by the bed and raises a hand, beckoning me closer with his fingers in a way that gets me even more worked up.

“I’m going to scent mark you,” he says as I start to walk slowly over to him.

“What?” I say again, though I don’t stop moving, wanting to be in his arms as he shrugs off his suit jacket and starts to unbutton his shirt. “Dominic, you haven’t had to scent mark me in months – I’m your mate I already carry your scent all the time -”

But my words falter a bit as Sinclair gets his shirt off, revealing his broad, muscled chest. My mouth goes a little dry as his hands move to his pants, unbuckling his belt and shoving them down to the floor.

“Do it, Ella,” he commands, his voice low and bossy.

I do as he says, raising my hands to my shoulders and pushing at the dress, slipping it off my arms and letting it pool on the floor around me.

“On the bed,” he orders, nodding to it, his voice brooking no argument.

I obey, stepping out of my dress and over to the bed. And then I slowly start to crawl across it, wearing nothing but my black pumps, and my panties, and my lacy bra.

A growl rumbles in my mate’s chest as he watches me crawl to him, as I sit up with my knees apart, looking up at him with my hands resting on my thighs.

“Well?” I say, flicking my eyes down over my nearly-naked body. “If you’re going to do it, Dominic -”

But he doesn’t let me finish my sentence, climbing onto the bed himself in a flash, grabbing me to him and then laying me slowly out onto the bed so that I’m stretched beneath him the way I used to be, at the beginning of all of this, when he would take his time rubbing his body over every inch of mine.

I moan a little as he begins the ceremony again, starting by pressing a lingering kiss to my neck and then moving downwards over me, pressing his skin to mine, making sure

that every inch of me bears his scent.

I do my best to stay still not because I can't touch him but...well, because part of me enjoys reliving this experience, thinking of when I was too scared to touch him, when I tried to deny what he did to me, physically, and how desperately I wanted him.

"Dominic," I say quietly as his hips settle between my legs, pressing himself against me as he works his hands slowly up and down my arms. "Not that I'm complaining, but... why are we doing this?"

"Because," he murmurs, lifting his body and then sliding a broad hand beneath me before swiftly flipping me over onto my stomach in one move that makes me laugh, just a little, before he starts on my shoulders and my back. "If I'm going to send you out there with him, I'm going to make sure he damn well knows you're mine."

And I laugh again, shaking my head even though it's resting comfortably against the pillow. Sinclair works his way down my back, making sure every inch of me gets a fair share of his attention. "He already knows that, Dominic," I murmur, almost undone by the pleasure of it. "Everyone does- the world does. A man would have to be a fool to try to take me away from you."

"Because he knows that I would kill him in a second," Sinclair growls, possessive and territorial and mine.

But I turn over a little, looking up at him, reaching out a hand to touch his arm, making him listen to me. "No," I say softly, holding his gaze. "Dominic, because everyone knows that no one could ever convince me to walk away."

And something in him gives at that, at the realization that he doesn't have to hold onto me because he knows that nothing in me wants to leave. And it's not that he didn't know, but

Well. He's an Alpha, isn't he? And I'm his Luna, and his mate. It's in him, somehow, this instinctual urge to hold me tight, to snarl recklessly at anyone who gets too close.

But as I hold his gaze, Sinclair sighs and lays himself down next to me. "All right, Ella," he murmurs, nodding and pulling me close against him. "You're right."

"Am I stinky enough?" I murmur, giggling a little bit.

"No," he growls, sliding his fingers into my hair and taking a steady grip there. "Not ever."

"Well then," I whisper, leaning close and pressing my lips almost against his. "I guess I'm going to be late to dinner then, aren't I?"

“Good,” he growls. “Make him wait.”

And then my mate kisses me, and presses me down into the mattress, and I relish every moment I'm in his arms.

Chapter 458 – Changes

Cora

I blow lightly on my cup of tea, doing my best to cool it and concentrate on the book that's open in my lap. But even as I try, my eyes continually drift to the picture window in front of me that overlooks the front of our property, including the driveway where Roger's going to pull in any minute now.

At least, that's what I've been telling myself for the past two hours.

I sigh, frustrated. I sent him a text a while ago asking him to let me know when he'd be home not that I really need to know, I just...wanted to know.

But Roger is notoriously bad at keeping an eye on his phone, and I know that he and Sinclair have had a particularly stressful day today. So, I do my best to just...exercise my patience.

But I sigh because, even though patience is usually one of my virtues...

Today? I'm finding it a little hard.

Happy!

The baby's little tap comes skipping down the bond out of nowhere, and I burst into a grin, looking down at myself.

"Oh, so are you liking the ginger tea, little guy?" I ask, laughing a little as I stroke a hand over my belly.

He doesn't respond because...well, because I asked him out loud, and he can't hear me, but I smile nonetheless, taking another sip.

Happy? I ask, sending the word and the feeling down the bond to him.

His answer comes back in an instant. Happy happy!

I laugh again, desperately pleased at this, and wondering what's going to come next with him. Because he's getting bigger, I can almost feel him growing by the day, and soon he's going to start feeling all sorts of new things. But will he even have words for them? Will we feel them before he does, and be able to pass the same emotions back and forth, asking questions like we do with happy? Will it be –

But even as I ponder it, excited, headlights flash across the drive and my face bursts into a grin.

“Daddy’s home, little baby,” I murmur, taking another sip of my tea before putting it down on the coffee table as I watch Roger park the car, and step out, and storm for our front door.

“Ut-oh,” I sigh, watching his every step and continuing to stroke my stomach. “Daddy’s in a mood, baby...”

Happy! The baby pulses, making me laugh for real now.

Because daddy is anything but happy, isn’t he?

This kid – already with his jokes. God, I love him so much.

Roger throws open the door, scowling as he storms through it, pushing it shut behind him and already looking up the stairs, clearly intent on going right up and not even noticing me sitting here.

“Hey!” I call cheerfully, and Roger whips towards me, stopping so fast in his tracks that he almost trips over his own feet.

“What are you doing in here?” he asks almost growls.

I lean back a little in surprise, looking him up and down. “I’m sorry,” I say, my voice deep with sarcasm. “Am I... not allowed to sit in our living room?”

Roger scowls, hanging his head for a second and running a hand through his hair before looking up at me again. “I’m sorry,” he says, and I can tell that he means it even though his voice is clipped. “You just surprised me – it’s been...”

“One hell of a day?” I offer.

And he sighs, and nods.

“Come here,” I say, reaching for him and folding my legs to make space on the couch.

“Actually, Cora,” he says, glancing up the stairs. “Can we just go to bed?”

“Really?” I ask, going a little still. “You’re not hungry, or...”

“Please,” he says, hanging his head again, almost begging for a moment. “I just want to go to bed. With you. And just...be there. All right?”

“Okay,” I say, a little disturbed now. Because I don’t frequently see him like this. Once

we broke into Roger's tough shell, he revealed himself to be funny, and sweet, and full of jokes. This Roger, which exists even beneath that? Earnest, vulnerable Roger?

Well, if he's showing me this side...he must really be upset.

I'm on my feet and moving to his side in a second. "Sure," I say, nodding to him and taking his hand. "Let's go."

And my mate nods to me once, tugging on my hand and pulling me up the stairs with him.

We don't say much as when we get up to the bedroom, instead moving smoothly through our evening routine. Roger gives a quick kiss before heading to the bathroom to take a short shower, washing off the day. I'm silent as I change into my nightgown, laying out a pair of pajama pants on the bed for him, because I know that's all he'll sleep in.

Then I turn on the fire because I want the warmth and a little light to see by, but otherwise shut off all the lights and climb into bed, waiting, idly stroking my stomach.

I watch my mate as he comes out of the bathroom a few minutes later, his face serious and his eyes far-off, thinking through something that I know he'll tell me about in a few minutes when he's ready. I can't help admiring him a little when he drops his towel and reaches for the folded pajama pants on the edge of the bed.

Feeling my desire down our bond despite my efforts to keep it to myself, Roger raises his head a little and smirks at me. But I just shrug, because I mean, it's not a secret.

My mate's hot. What am I supposed to do when he shows up all naked in bedroom, the fire highlighting the carved lines of his body in a flickering orange glow?

His smirk turns into a full smile by the time he gets the pajama pants on and moves to his side of the bed, pulling back the covers and slipping beneath them. I scootch across the mattress, pressing myself to his side, and Roger lets out a wicked little growl as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me close, resting his cheek against my chest and letting out a long sigh of comfort.

"Poor Roger," I murmur, running my fingers through his still-damp hair and cooing softly to him in a way I rarely do.

Because most of our relationship is based on a great deal of laughter and teasing. But tonight? Tonight, I can tell he needs something different.

I start to run my fingernails lightly over the skin of his back in a way that I know he likes.

And Roger, to my content, starts almost to purr with the pleasure of it. Interestingly, for how much we usually want to tear into each other, there's not too much that's sexual about this moment. Instead, it's simply comfort freely offered and gratefully accepted by two people who love each other very, very much.

"Tell me everything, baby," I murmur, hoping he will.

And Roger, to my pleased surprise, comes right out with it.

"It's war, Cora," he sighs.

"Really?" I ask, unable to keep the dread from my voice. "Did they declare it?"

"No," he says, shaking his head and wrapping an arm around my waist, wanting me as close as I can get. "But- we were in meetings with the Atalaxians all day and it's very clear that's where they're headed. Dominic could tell, I could tell, dad could tell. They've got us in a bad spot, and they want war. So? They're going to declare it the minute this delegation gets back."

I sigh, dread filling me, but still...

I mean, we knew it was heading for this, didn't we?

So, what has him all wrapped up?

"Tell me," I say quietly, nudging him a little down the bond, letting him know that I know that there's more.

He doesn't bother to deny it, instead heaving a big sigh. "Dominic and I talked a lot tonight about what it is we need to do. He sent Ella to that damn dinner -"

"Really?" I ask, my eyes going wide.

"We're grasping at straws, Cora," he says, defending his brother even though he should know he doesn't have to. I'm actually glad Ella's going to that dinner – there is something weird between her and that Prince, and I for one want her to figure it out.

Plus, I know she'd never, ever betray her mate.

Even if...

Well. No point in voicing my suspicions now, especially if they're likely to be wrong. No need to raise trouble that's not already there.

“Everyone’s got to do their part,” Roger says next, sounding a little bitter about it.

Worried, I move down in the bed so that we’re laying next to each other in the dark, face to face so that I can see his eyes. “Tell me what you mean when you say that,” I reply, knowing that there’s something there.

Roger sighs again, closing his eyes as if he can’t bear to look at me when he says it. “Dominic asked me to take the military,” he says, shaking his head. ” To train the armies, to run them, to...to be at the front lines of this war, Cora.”

My blood goes cold as I hear him say it, and dread fills me at the idea of my mate at the front of this war the King’s brother, in charge, a clear target.

And for the first time...

My baby passes me the same emotion back: worry.

Chapter 459 – Dinner with the Prince

Ella

Conner opens my car door and gives an odd little bow as I get out of it.

“What on earth was that?” I ask, grinning at him.

Conner, to his credit, blushes a little as he gives me a shrug. “I don’t know, you’re a Queen now. Aren’t I supposed to bow?”

I wrinkle my nose at him. “I have no idea,” I say, laughing, pleased when he laughs with me and closes the car door behind me. “But since neither of us know, maybe we should cut it out?”

“All right,” he says with a grin, looking up towards the restaurant where Calvin asked me to meet him. I’m a little thrilled, honestly, to be out of the palace for the first time in weeks and also pleased that this was kept quiet enough that there is no press here to capture the moment.

“I’m glad you’re here, Conner,” I say quietly, taking a deep breath to steel myself.

“Anytime, Luna,” he murmurs, and he keeps close by my side as I walk up the stairs.

I’m relieved to see, when I get inside, that the restaurant is dark and only about half full, all of the patrons gathered in deep booths so that I can only see the tops of their heads. I smile to myself, thinking that the Prince chose his venue well.

“This way, Highness,” a young woman says, smiling at me and leading me not into the dining room but towards a small elevator. The three of us are a bit packed in, but the ride is short – just to the second floor. When the door slides open, the young woman smiles and gestures forward into a very small, very pretty private dining room. There’s even a little balcony terrace outside that looks absolutely gorgeous in the moonlight.

Calvin is sitting alone at a table, looking at his phone with a half-full glass of wine in front of him. When I step into the room he looks up and he smiles.

And damn it, but I have to admit...he’s really good looking. Not as good looking as Sinclair – I mean, at least not to me but the way that smile lights his face, and those cheekbones, and those violet eyes?

Damn.

But I don’t have much time to think on it as he stands up and holds out a hand to me, inviting me to the table.

I smile myself, not needing to force it as I cross the room to take his hand. That buzz of electricity passes between us as he leans forward, murmuring a greeting and intending to brush the barest kiss against my cheek – nothing inappropriate, nothing that wouldn't pass between an ambassador and a Queen

But he flinches back at the last moment, and I smirk a little, considering that he probably got a whiff of precisely how much Sinclair has marked me as his tonight.

Calvin hesitates as if tempted, but then he pulls away.

Still, something flutters in me at the nearness of this man.

What the hell is going on?

"I'm so glad you came," Calvin says, gesturing towards my seat. Then, to my surprise, he looks beyond me at Conner, who is standing a few paces behind. "Will you be joining us?"

I turn to look at Conner, my eyebrows raised

"No," Conner says, nodding and smiling a little in recognition of the graciousness of the invitation. "I'm fine over here," he gestures towards a little couch in the corner of the room, where he'll be close enough to protect me but far enough to give us our privacy.

Calvin nods to him and Conner moves away. I smile a little as I sit.

"Honestly," Calvin says, his voice hesitating a little, "I wasn't sure if you were coming."

"I'm sorry I'm late," I say, though... well, I'm not really sorry, am I? My mate needed a little reassurance and I'm happy to give it to him, even if it's at Calvin's expense.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, peering at me, truly trying to assess what he can do to make me comfortable. "I know that nine in the evening is late for a dinner in your culture -"

I smile at him, pleased at his solicitousness – because I honestly get the impression that he cares. He wanted to have this dinner so that we can talk, but if I'm hungry? He wants me to eat.

"Actually, I am a little hungry," I say, leaning forward with a laugh. "And thirsty, if there's more wine."

"Always more wine," he murmurs, raising a hand and signaling to a waiter I didn't see. The waiter comes forward and fills a waiting glass for me.

"I haven't had much to drink lately," I say quietly, raising the glass to my lips and savoring the taste of the rich red. "But one can't hurt, can it?"

"Can't hurt what?" Calvin asks, leaning forward in his curiosity. He frowns at me, genuinely not getting it.

"The baby," I say, looking at him like it's obvious while he takes a long sip of his drink. "Rafe's only a few months old – I'm still breastfeeding, Calvin

And then I stop, and burst into laughter, because Calvin chokes a little on his wine and turns beet red.

"Seriously?" I say, leaning forward, unable to stop my grin. "Is that should I not have said that? Is that embarrassing for you?"

He clears his throat and looks down at the table, embarrassed, though I see him smiling and shaking his head. "No, Highness, it's -"

"Ella," I correct, my voice pleading.

"Ella," he says, looking up at me a little now, growing more comfortable. "It's just honestly, I've never heard a woman say that before."

"Really?" I say, leaning forward and looking at him with wide eyes, setting my glass down on the table next to me. "I mean, did you know –"

"Of course I know," he says, laughing and rolling his eyes at me. "I understand the mechanics of how young babies are fed, it's just..." he leans back, running a hand through his hair, "honestly, Ella, women in my world never, ever talk to men about that sort of thing. And it's not that I agree with that, or think they shouldn't I was just... surprised."

Slowly, I shake my head at him, holding his eyes. "You know I think that's crazy, right?"

He laughs, nodding, and I laugh with him.

"I do know that," Calvin says on a sigh. "And I agree. It is...crazy, that in my world women and men are so separate. It is something which I'd like to see changed, but which is so ingrained in our culture that it's going to take generations to really shift."

I nod, understanding. And then I tilt my head at him, interested to see how easy this conversation already is. Because even if we're talking about a really complicated subject that's difficult for him? The way that we're talking – it's like speaking with an old friend,

someone I've known my whole life.

I'm not surprised for a moment, then, when the conversation from there flows easily. Calvin asks questions about my life and I tell him everything, readily, easily – all about Cora, and my sweet baby Rafe, and growing up in the orphanage and the strange way I met my mate. Some details I keep back – he doesn't need to know all about my powers, or the fact that my mother is a deity – but the rest? The rest I share.

It doesn't pass my attention that he moves on readily whenever I begin to speak about Sinclair, but honestly? I don't ask a whole lot about his wife. And I wonder at myself there, trying to figure out what part of me is holding back. Because I am interested in her fascinated, really, dying to know – but for some reason?

Somehow, I just don't ask.

We go for hours, learning a great deal more about each other. Food comes, and we eat it, and I'm sure that it's good but honestly I don't know if I taste it because I'm lost in this conversation, which contains a great deal of laughter and joy.

When a clock in the corner chimes midnight, though, my jaw drops open. "Has it really been that long?" I say, marveling and shaking my head at my companion – my friend now, undeniably.

Calvin grimaces a little. "We have a saying," he says with a shrug, "that mice wait for good friends lose themselves in each other, and that's when they eat all the grain."

"Really?" I say, wrinkling my nose, charmed a bit.

"Yes," he says, leaning back and laughing. "So, when you have a mouse problem in your home, people dismiss it as a sign of a house full of friendship and laughter."

"Oh," I say, smiling now and nodding. "Like how we say it's good luck, if a bird poops on you."

He blinks at me, shocked. "Wha-what!?"

I burst into laughter yet again, leaning back in my chair and letting the joy sweep through me because of course, if you didn't grow up hearing that, it really is just gross, isn't it?

"Just something we say," I say, wiping at my eyes a little, my body still shaking with mirth. "I think to make people feel better when that happens to them."

He laughs too, grinning at me and understanding.

I sigh then, and look back at Conner, who is still sitting on the little couch flicking through his phone. "I guess I should -"

"Stay," Calvin says suddenly, his voice serious now in a way it wasn't a moment ago, and I feel his hand suddenly on top of mine on that table.

Whatever it is between us that thing that happens when we touch – it sweeps through me, making the hair on my neck stand on end.

Calvin stares up at me, his eyes pleading, and I know that he feels it too. "Please, Ella," he says quietly, glancing towards the terrace next to us. "One more drink – just to round out the night."

I bite my lip, knowing that I shouldn't but...

"All right," I say quietly, nodding to him, and not moving my hand away from his.

Chapter 460 – Confessions

Ella

Calvin nods to me, just once, and then stands, moving his hand from mine and going to speak to the waiter, nodding towards the terrace. As he does I turn to Conner, who raises his eyebrows at me. I know he heard, and now he's asking if that's what I really want.

I hesitate, but then I nod and he does as well, putting his phone back into the pocket.

Calvin's at my side then, gesturing towards the terrace, and as I move with him I hear Conner walking up behind me. As we step outside, Conner moves to take a seat at the table we just vacated so that he can keep his eyes on me with this change of venue.

I send him a little smile, and Conner gives me a wink, as Calvin and I step out into the fresh night air.

"Your man," Calvin says, leaning against the balustrade and glancing in at Conner before smiling at me. "He keeps a close eye on you."

"Conner is a friend," I say, smiling at the waiter who comes and brings us two cocktails. "As well as one hell of a fighter. He'll kick your ass if you try anything."

Calvin laughs at this, shaking his head. "Well then he's going to have a boring night," he murmurs with a bit of a sigh. "You're safe with me. Not that your mate the King hasn't already made his own assurances."

"What?" I ask, pausing with the drink on the way to my lips.

Calvin nods over the balustrade down to the street. "Six men," he says, "on the street and in front of the restaurant." Then he takes a moment to turn and peer upwards. "Probably more on the roof."

"Really?" I ask, turning and peering up, though I can't see anything. "A bit of overkill," I murmur, scowling a little. Sinclair so overprotective. Somehow, instinctually, I know that Calvin has no ill intentions towards me honestly, I knew he was my friend before, but tonight really solidifies it for me.

But Sinclair? Well. I suppose he doesn't know it the way I do.

"Nah, it's not overkill," Calvin says, sipping his drink and smiling at me. "With you as his Queen? I get it."

I smile at the compliment, but I also narrow my eyes a little. Because that? That was...a

little closer to hitting on me than he's ventured all night.

"And what about you," I say, a little tart, because if he wants to talk about Sinclair then I'm definitely bringing up his wife. "How many guards did you leave at home with the mother of your children?"

"Oh, thousands," he says with a casual sigh that makes me laugh. But when he grins at me I realize that he's serious.

"Thousands!?"

He laughs a little. "She lives in the palace," he says with a shrug, "with my entire extended family. She is...very well protected there."

"What's her name?" I ask, my voice soft.

"Margaret," he replies, looking out over the streets, his voice flat like he's simply reporting facts.

Noting by his body language that he very much does not want to talk about this, I change the subject, looking down at my drink. "And what is this?" I ask.

"It's called Spirenbreau," he says, nodding towards it. "I had it brought from Atalaxia to share with those I hoped would be my new friends. It's a traditional summer drink. Try it," he says, giving a little shrug. "I think you'll like it."

And so I take a little sip, pleasantly surprised at the rich taste and the crisp little bite of the chilled liquor. It tastes like melons.

"I do like it," I say, smiling at him and placing the drink down on the stone balustrade against which he leans. Then I lean on it too, staring at him as a quiet minute passes between us.

"Calvin," I say quietly, leaning closer towards him, gazing at him seriously.

The smile drops from his face a little, his expression matching mine. "Why won't you tell me about your wife?"

He drops his eyes then, looking down at the drink in his hand and I think taking a breath. "I'll tell you all you want to know about her, Ella," he murmurs.

"But why do I have to ask?"

He lifts his eyes to mine then and something...something passes between us, even

without us touching. Almost unconsciously, he takes a step closer to me.

“I don’t want to speak about her with you,” he murmurs as I stare up into his face, into those violet eyes.

I nod a little, grateful for his honesty but... “Why?” I ask, my voice breathy, a little stunned. Because this man stunning, his entire presence consuming. And something about him – it draws me.

“Because,” he replies, a little growl in his voice now. “It is not right, Ella. Not with...not with you.”

“Why?” I ask again, pushing, shaking my head and not understanding. Because...

“Do you seriously not know?” he murmurs, staring down into my face, I swear a little angry now. “Because if you’re just toying with me, Ella, making me say it when we both know –

“What are you talking about?” I say, flinching back a little.

He blinks at me, surprised, and then he leans forward, closing the distance I created in moving back. We’re not touching, no part of us

But the air between us, I swear it glows.

My eyes widen as energy crackles in the air, like static electricity, or tiny bits of lightening. “What...what is this?” I ask, my voice starting to tremble a little in fear.

“I don’t know,” he murmurs, shaking his head, though his eyes don’t leave my face. “It has never nothing like this has ever happened to me before and I’ve never heard of it – ”

“Heard of what?” I ask, begging now, a little scared.

“Ella,” he says, his voice earnest, and he reaches out a hand to wrap around my arm and I gasp, because even though he doesn’t even touch my skin, this thing between us it intensifies.

I feels – god, it feels like a spark in my soul, like a thousand tiny flares of light

But I don’t have any time to explore it, because Calvin presses forward, his eyes on mine. “She’s not my mate, Ella,” he says all in a rush.

“What?” I ask, confused overwhelmed

“My wife,” he says, shaking his head at me. “Our marriage – it was arranged, expected. We didn’t even have a mating ceremony because we’re not even chosen mates – she was selected for me, so we could have strong children -”

I shake my head, a little horrified at the idea. And then something within me makes me reconsider my judgment, because honestly didn’t I do something similar the day when I selected my human sperm donor? I, too, picked someone because I thought they would give me a happy, healthy baby

But I mean, I didn’t marry them-

I shake my head, seeking to clear it as Calvin takes another step towards me so that there’s just a breath of space between us now. I tilt my head to look up at him, frightened and fascinated.

“She’s – she’s not your mate?” I ask, my voice choked.

“No, Ella,” he says, raising a hand to cup my cheek. He hesitates before he places it there, but then he gives in almost as if he can’t help himself. And I gasp a little at the surge of something of power, perhaps? – that passes through me.

“Then -” I whisper, my whole body starting to tremble with the force of it of whatever this is.

“Ella,” Calvin says softly, almost an apology, because he knows that this could wreck both of our lives, “I think you are my mate.”

Chapter 461 – Back to my Mate

Ella

Immediately, I tear myself away from him. “What!?” I gasp, appalled at the idea.

His face falls in horror, in disappointment. “Ella, I – ”

But I don’t say another word to him. Instead, I spin and hurry back into the dining room as fast as I can. Conner, seeing me coming, is immediately on his feet, a growl in his throat.

“What’s wrong,” he snaps as I press myself to his side, his arm going instinctually around me, protecting me. “What did he do?”

“Nothing,” I breathe, glancing back at Calvin who looks at me with a hand over his mouth, as if he could cup the words he just said into his palm and shove them back down his throat. “Can we just...can we go home?”

“Did he touch you!?” Conner snaps, looking at me, appalled.

“No, Conner!” I say, my voice breaking as I look up at him a little desperately. “It’s fine – it’s all fine! Can we just go!?”

His eyes sweep over me as his growl intensifies, but when he sees that I really am all right he’s immediately in action, moving me quickly to a fire exit next to the elevator and hastily pushing open the door, ushering me quickly down the set of stairs as he lifts his phone to his ear, calling the car and telling it to be ready right now.

The hostess gasps a little as we burst out of the staircase, but Conner ignores her as he ushers me out of the restaurant and over to our car, which immediately pulls up to the curve.

My whole body is still shaking with the intensity of the last few minutes. It might even be trembling harder now, because while I started to tremble because of whatever thing is between Calvin and I, I’m starting to shake harder now as I try to work through the implications of this.

“Luna,” Conner says, his voice worried as he helps me duck into the car and then climbs in after me, shutting the door. “Are you all right!?”

“Um,” I say, looking up at him, wrapping my arms around myself.

His eyes go wide when I don’t immediately say “yes.”

Frantic, he barks at the driver to go and then slips off his jacket and wraps it tightly around my shoulders, using his hands to chafe at my arms, trying to warm me up. And while honestly it does nothing – I mean, I'm not actually cold.

– I appreciate his efforts, his desire to help.

I lean into my friend a little just a little, murmuring a thank-you as I pull the jacket tight around me and tumble into my thoughts. Because...

Mate.

Mate!

Honestly, it's not possible – Sinclair is my mate

But...

I shake my head, trying to figure it out. Because Sinclair – I know he's my mate, my fated mate, and that what we have is so much deeper than just a chosen mate. I mean, our connection, our finding each other, our family – it was fated, envisioned for us even as I was a child. He's not at all just some guy I met and liked by chance-

We are – I know it in my bones, we are fated mates, in our own way.

But...

I bite my lip because...Lydia.

Sinclair already had a fated mate before me. And it hadn't been a good fit but they had been sure: the bond was there, she was his fated mate, and wolves – we're only supposed to get one.

So...if Sinclair can have two...

Wouldn't it make sense that I could too?

I moan a little at the agony of the idea, leaning my head against Conner, who wraps a tight arm around me.

"If you don't drive faster," he growls at the driver, "I'm going to rip your damn head off and carry the Luna back myself. So DRIVE!"

The driver glances back at my bodyguard with wide eyes, but he does indeed step on it. And I close my eyes and pray that he does get me home fast.

Because I need to be home, with my mate and my baby.

Right. Now.

Conner stays pinned at my side as he gets me home, helping me out of the car in the garages below the palace and escorting me through the halls. But as we approach my door I lift a hand, placing it flat on his chest.

“You should go,” I murmur, stopping and starting to shrug off his jacket.

“What?” he asks me, baffled, looking at the very short space between us and the door to my suite as if a thousand assassins could leap out in that tiny distance.

“Conner,” I say, looking up at him seriously. “I am so grateful for how good you’ve been to me tonight -”

“Of course, Luna,” he says, frowning down at me. “You’re well, you’re our Luna, and our Queen – I’d do anything for you -”

“And I’m very grateful for that,” I say, handing his jacket back to him. “But Sinclair is going to be...volatile this evening,” I say, my lips pressing into a thin line. “And considering that your scent is on me now...”

He frowns at me, confused, but then realizes that I’m probably right, because he was so nice and comforting to me in the car, putting his arm around me.

Conner puts his face in his hands, letting out a deep sigh before looking up at me. “What did that asshole do to you, Luna? I’ll kill him for it -”

“Nothing,” I insist, shaking my head.

“Seriously, Conner, he didn’t do anything bad – just...just let me handle Sinclair, all right? And maybe...make yourself scarce for twenty-four hours or so.”

Conner laughs a little, but he also goes a little pale. “All right,” he murmurs, nodding. Then he looks again at the door to my room. “Are you sure you – ”

“I can walk ten feet by myself, Conner,” I say, rolling my eyes a little, and I hear him laugh as I wave over my shoulder. I pause with my hand on the doorknob, watching Conner disappear down the hall, and then with a deep sigh I press the door open and step inside.

The room is dark, which makes sense, because it’s very late now, and the baby is

asleep –

“Ella?” Sinclair asks, and I don’t even jump as my eyes move to where he’s

sitting in a chair by the window, fully dressed, clearly waiting for me. He stands, already intuiting that something’s wrong.

And I sigh, pressing the door shut behind me and leaning back against it.

“What’s wrong,” he growls, taking a step towards me and I hang my head and shake it, tears pricking at my eyes.

Because as much as I held it together on the rest of the car ride home, not wanting Conner to see me fall apart as we walked back to the room, now that I’m here?

I start to completely unravel. Sinclair gasps a little when he realizes how upset I am and he’s before me in a moment, reaching for me.

And I throw myself into his arms, wrapping my own around his waist, pressing my head against his chest and sobbing as I take a deep breath of his comforting scent, as I feel his arms wrap around me, as he lowers his face to my hair and presses a kiss there.

He lets me cry for a moment, I think shocked

But then that moment passes and I feel him start to go tense with fury.

“What did he do,” Sinclair growls, already livid.

But I tighten my arms around him and shake my head.

Because Calvin – honestly, he didn’t do anything.

It’s my stupid mother this time again.

Because the Goddess is the one who deals out mates – and did she seriously do this? Did she give me a second mate, when I’m finally, finally happily settled with my first?

What the hell is she playing at?

Chapter 462 – Rampage

Ella

“Ella,” my mate growls as my tears start to subside a little bit. And I look up at him with a sniff, into his face that is terribly dark with his anger. His whole body is shaking – not trembling like mine was, but honestly shaking as if he’s trying very, very hard to hold himself back.

“You need to tell me, right now,” Sinclair continues, his voice thick with the effort of not bursting from the room and hunting down the Prince, ” what the hell just happened. I need to know whether or not I need to go murder someone.”

A dark little laugh bursts from me at this – at the casual way my gorgeous mate threatens murder – and his growl intensifies because he is perfectly serious. Hastily I shake my head no as I look up at him.

“No, Dominic,” I say, doing my best to pull myself together and stand up straight. “It’s not like that – it’s...” and I sigh, my eyes going wide. “I mean, it’s a lot – but he didn’t do anything really bad.”

To my surprise, Dominic snarls, his head whipping towards the door.

“Dominic, I just said that – ”

“You said not really bad,” he snaps, implying that he did something bad.”

I reach a hand up now and place it on his cheek, something about Sinclair losing his temper allowing me to fortify myself, to pull myself together for both of us. “I’m going to need you to contain all of this,” I say quietly, making him look at me. “Because you are not going to like what I have to say. But you have to hear it.”

“Please, Ella,” he murmurs, dropping his arms from their tight place around me and taking my face in his hands. ” You’re killing me. Please, please tell me what is going on.”

“Not until you promise not to murder anyone,” I say, dead serious.

And he sighs, but then he nods, agreeing to my terms.

And then I take my mate’s hand and I lead him over to the bed. I take a moment just the briefest one peer into my baby’s crib, my heart filling with joy at the sight of my sweet, darling baby boy. I send him a very tiny pulse of happiness and joy down the bond, hoping it gives him sweet dreams, and then I turn to my bed, and I pull back the covers, and I kick off my shoes and climb in fully dressed. to

“What the hell?” Sinclair asks. “Ella, you’re -”

“Just get into bed,” I sigh, reaching for him. “Come on bed is...it’s where we are just us, where we have all our best talks.”

Sinclair sighs but, seeing that I’m serious, he does as I say, crawling over me to get to his side of the bed and then slipping himself under the covers. I immediately curl up next to him, tucking my head beneath his chin as he wraps his arms around me.

“All right, trouble,” he murmurs, again kissing the top of my head, and I smile at the nickname, because it lets me know that he’s in a better emotional place to hear news that I know is going to wreck him. “Tell me everything.”

And I do as my mate says.

I start at the beginning and I don’t hold anything back.

I tell him all about how much Calvin and I were instantly drawn to each other from the moment I saw him, about the pulses of energy between us whenever we touched. I tell him about the genuine friendship I feel for the man and our instant connection – how it feels, immediately, like talking to an old friend. And then I tell him about what happened tonight – the glow between us, the spark within me that I’m pretty sure he felt within himself, the very literal energy that passes between our bodies when we’re close.

Sinclair goes tenser and tenser as I speak, but he doesn’t interrupt. I wind my arms closer around him not only because I’m grateful for him, but also because I think he needs it, needs to feel my body close so that he doesn’t race out of the room and hunt this man down.

But he breaks when I finally tell him Calvin’s last words.

“And he said...Dominic, he says he thinks that I’m his mate.”

The snarl that rips from Sinclair when I say the words even I draw back in fear as he pulls himself from my arms and throws himself out of bed, his chest heaving, his eyes on the door. His whole body is trembling again, harder now, and he very obviously holds himself back from shifting into his wolf and tearing through the palace – looking for this man

Rafe starts to cry in his crib at the sound and I think the insane emotions that are pulsing from Sinclair at this moment, but I can’t even look over at my baby, my eyes only on my mate.

“Dominic!” I cry, reaching for him, “ don’t -”

“What the hell am I supposed to do, Ella,” he growls, and I see his body start to shift as he loses control, his shoulders hunching, his nails elongating to razor-sharp claws. “Just let this man live after he’s tried to take you from me!?”

“He didn’t -”

“He did!” Sinclair barks, and then he loses it, letting out a roar as he transforms fully into his wolf and sprints for the door. He bashes the handle with his paw, breaking it and ripping the door nearly off its hinges as he wrenches it open

And then I’m alone, my jaw hanging open, sitting in bed in my black gown as my baby screams in the crib next to me.

It takes me...a long moment to pull myself together as I stare at the open door to the bright hallway, as I consider.

Well, that my mate is probably out there hunting a Prince, adding more fuel to the fire of war.

But then I turn my head towards my child, who still screams with fear and shock and sadness, and I know that there’s absolutely nothing I can do.

And so I slowly stand up, and move to my child, and gather him into my arms and shush him lightly as I move to the door, pushing it shut as best I can with my foot as I concentrate on my baby.

My heart feels like it’s been torn to shreds, honestly. I’m livid, I realize, because I need Sinclair with me tonight I need to talk this through with him, and as much as I realize that he’s upset I can’t believe that he just did that just burst from the room in a murderous rampage.

But as I look down at my child, and I stare at his poor crying face, I force myself to slow my breathing and start to feel...centered.

Because as much as Calvin may think he’s found his mate, and Sinclair might be rightly flipping out because he thinks someone tried to take me from him...

Me?

I’m steady.

I made my choice long ago, and as I look down at my little Rafe – who looks so much like his father that it breaks my heart – I have no doubts at all.

I pass calm and feelings of safety down my bond to my baby and he settles a little in my arms, though he still fusses, unnerved by the noise and the surge of emotions that woke him. So, I continue to bounce him a little, shushing and murmuring comforting nonsense. As I keep my attention to my baby, I move towards the window and turn to my wolf inside me.

Well? I say to her, a little pissed off. You've been awfully quiet throughout all of this.

She whines a little, guilty, torn, and turns in a confused circle.

Is he our mate? I ask, a little tremulous, considering that she's perhaps been quiet because I've been pushing her away, not wanting to know.

She sits back on her haunches, lifting her nose to the sky and letting out a confused howl. I don't know, she says, hanging her head and then laying down with her snout between her paws. He is ...he is something to us. But Dominic is our mate. This other one...he is important, but I don't know what he is.

I sigh in frustration, passing it to my wolf who again whines, feeling guilty that she can't help me parse it, that she doesn't know.

And then I turn my face up to the sky, my eyes immediately finding the moon hanging exactly where I knew it would be.

"Well, mom?" I ask, shaking my head at her. "Are you happy now?"

But of course she doesn't reply, even though I continue to stare at her for a very, very long time.

I don't know how much time has passed before Rafe falls back asleep and I turn away from the window, heading back to my bed. I take Rafe with me, because I'm exhausted and far from sleep and I want his company. I curl up in my bed with my little baby, staring down at his beautiful sleeping face.

Don't do anything you'll regret, I say to Sinclair down our bond, hoping he's close enough to hear it.

And honestly hoping that my advice is not too late.

Chapter 463 – Fated Mates

Ella

Dawn lights the horizon when the door creaks open and Sinclair comes back into the room. My eyes go immediately to him from my place sitting up in bed where I've spent way, way too many hours alone gazing down at my little baby.

Sinclair pushes the broken door shut and sighs before he raises his eyes to mine. "I'm sorry," he says, his voice thick with guilt.

"You'd damn well better be," I murmur to him, because honestly? I'm pissed.

He moves closer to me now and I can see that he's absolutely exhausted, but my eyes rove over him, looking for blood. Because if he killed Calvin, surely there would be –

"I didn't kill anyone," he murmurs with a sigh as he sinks onto the bed next to me, burying his head in his hands. "Though I wanted to, and I would have."

"He didn't do anything, Dominic," I say, my voice determined.

"He did, Ella," Sinclair snaps, glaring at me. "I get that we're in uncharted territory here with the possibility of both of us having two fated mates, but honestly? It's not like there isn't some precedent. If a couple are chosen mates and one of them meets their fated mate? There's a protocol to be followed."

I pause for a moment, a little shocked. "Really?" I ask, curious. "What is it?"

"Well it's damn well not keep it a secret from everyone and take her out on a romantic date where you touch her face -"

And I can't help myself from laughing a little at this, a dark, angry little laugh.

He turns to glare at me but I just shake my head. "Dominic, if the man thinks that he's my fated mate and all he does is touch my face – is that honestly a crime worth his death?"

"Yes," he growls, completely sincere, "when it's my mate it sure as hell is."

"Did you find him?" I ask, because I have a lot I want to say to this man, but I need the details first.

"I did not," he murmurs.

"Did you try?" I ask, pushing him.

“For...about fifteen minutes I did, yes,” he confesses. “And then I came to my senses and realized that I cannot kill an Atalaxian prince without dire consequences.”

“So, you realized that you were overreacting -”

“I was not overreacting

“Fifteen minutes in,” I continue, ignoring him, letting my sharp tone let him know precisely how I feel about this. “And then you just...stayed out all night? And left me here, all alone, even though you knew I was upset and needed you?”

He pauses now and I see his shoulders slump with guilt. “That’s why I apologized.”

“Not because you hunted a Prince.”

He snaps his gaze to me now. “I don’t regret that, Ella,” he says, his voice low with anger again. “He is very lucky I didn’t find him, and if he’s a smart man he’ll never step foot in my presence again.”

My eyes go wide as I realize that he’s dead serious.

“So what did you do all this time?” I ask, my voice soft.

“I went to Conner and...kind of ripped his door down.”

“What!?”

“I could smell him on you,” he growls, and I groan because I knew that was going to happen.

“Was he there?”

Sinclair nods. “I...owe him an apology too. I frightened him, but I just... confirmed the details you told me.”

“Did you think I was lying!?”

He turns to give me a glare. “I just worried that you missed something, Ella – I wanted another perspective. All right?”

I clench my teeth a little, unhappy, but I nod. “Then what did you do with the hours you were gone?”

"I just...ran," he says, shaking his head. "I needed to sort my mind, burn out my energy and my anger. But," my mate continues, turning to look at me, "I do regret leaving you here all alone. I honestly don't know how I could have stayed, Ella – I'm not...I wasn't strong enough of a man to find a way to stay at your side when I wanted to tear the world to shreds."

He drops his gaze again, guilt in every line of him. And my heart wrenches to see it because – I mean, because I know we're going to get through this, and I understand that he was completely overwhelmed by the idea that I might have another mate, that he could potentially lose me

But still. I was so baffled, and so confused, and I needed him to hold me and talk to me last night – and he wasn't here.

"You have to find a way to be that stronger man, Dominic," I say quietly, shaking my head at him. "For me, for your children," I shrug, looking down at sleeping Rafe. "Because this isn't going to be the only challenge we face, and your only solution can't be to shift into your wolf and go out to murder the world when fate crosses you."

He sighs again, and he nods, because he knows that I'm right.

I let him have a moment to sit in it, clenching my teeth against my own instinct to comfort him. When I can't bear it any longer, I speak.

"So, are you done?" I ask, my voice quiet.

He turns to me, confused. "Done what?"

"Done flipping out? Can we finally have the conversation that we should have had hours ago? Because I have just been sitting here, wondering, and worried..."

And damn it, even though I tried to be tough, the tears come back to my eyes now and my lower lip starts to tremble.

I hear Sinclair's tongue click as he shifts towards me then, reaching out across the bed and cupping my cheek in his palm. Instantly, wanting his touch, I press my face into his hand. "Yes," he says quietly, moving now to climb fully into the bed with me. "I am sorry, Ella you're right. You needed me and I left. I am...very ashamed."

I nod down at the bed, telling him silently to lay down. He does as I say as I sniff back my tears and we both lay down on our soft mattress, the baby between us.

"It was very difficult for me," he murmurs, trying to explain. "To hear that another man... could have some kind of claim on you."

“And how do you think I felt?” I say quietly, staring into his eyes, “the first time I heard about Lydia? And then when she came back into your life?”

He frowns a little. “Lydia – that’s different – she’s – ”

“Your fated mate, Dominic,” I say, shaking my head at him. “So if you don’t think that I understand the jealousy you felt when you heard that Calvin – ”

He growls a little even when he hears the name, which makes me smirk just a little bit. But I press forward.

“That he even just claimed that he thought I could be his mate?”

Sinclair takes a moment to think this through. “All right,” he murmurs. ”

Then you may have some inkling. But Ella – is he?”

I open my eyes wide and shrug. ” Dominic, I have no idea!”

Sinclair sighs, closing his eyes for a moment and getting his thoughts and emotions in order. I wait quietly, studying his beautiful face, and when he opens his eyes his expression is newly determined.

“All right, trouble,” he says, his voice now a deep purr. “Let’s get some things straight.”

He reaches for me then and I scooch closer so that Rafe is pressed warmly between us. Sinclair slides an arm easily around me, his palm pressed warmly around my lower back, and I reach out my own hand, my fingers tracing up and down along his ribs. I nod then, letting him know that I’m ready.

“Even if he is your mate,” Sinclair says, closing his eyes as if he can’t stand to look at me as he says those words. “Would you leave me for him?”

“No,” I say instantly, frowning, a little appalled. And then, angry, I give Sinclair a little smack on the ribs that makes his eyes fly open. “Why would you even ask that!?”

“I just wanted to have it said,” he growls, giving me a half-hearted glare. “So that we’re on the same page, all right? It’s not unheard of, for someone to leave their mate when they meet someone they’re fated to -”

“I’m your fated mate, Dominic,” I growl, raising my hand to stroke my fingers over the stubble on his cheeks, my heart breaking to think that he’d even considered me leaving him as a possibility. “I love you, and I’m in love with you, and I’m not going anywhere.

Okay?"

"Okay," he murmurs, pressing his eyes shut for a moment and taking a deep breath.
"Then the next order of business is...to figure out if he's actually your fated mate."

"Well," I say softly, frowning at him. " How...would I know?"

Sinclair frowns at me, confused. "Ella ...I mean...you would just know."

Chapter 464 – Dedication

Ella

I frown at him, starting to get angry again. “What does that even mean, Dominic!? You just know – well obviously if I just knew, then I’d have told you definitively yes or no!”

“Well, maybe you do know and you’re trying to spare my feelings!”

My eyes go wide then and I lean forward, staring at him, a little appalled. “I am trying to figure out a very important question about my life and my identity, Dominic,” I growl. “So no, I am not trying to spare your feelings I am asking you to help me. So please, tell me how it is that a person would just know.”

Sinclair sighs in frustration, his eyes narrowed at me before he shuts them and does his best to think.

“Sometimes I forget,” he murmurs, “that you’ve only had your wolf for a few months. Please, Ella, forgive me. I – there must be some things that are instinctual to me, and to Roger, that to you and Cora are...harder.”

“Yes,” I say, nodding, agreeing. “So .” I hesitate now, because I’m about to ask him for details that I’m honestly not sure that I want. But I steel myself, knowing that I need them. “How did you know...that Lydia was your fated mate?”

He sighs a little and opens his eyes to look steadily at me, a question in his expression. I nod seriously, letting him know that I understand what I’m asking. So, he sighs again and begins.

“It was...instant,” he explains, his eyes going a little distant with the memory. “The intensity of it was like my attraction to you – because I was always attracted to you, Ella, even when you were just the human nanny that lived down the road. But with Lydia? When I saw her after I reached my majority, the bond was instant.”

I think back to when I saw Calvin for the first time and – well...I did notice him, didn’t I? And when he looked at me, I couldn’t look away? Was that...

“Can you tell me more?” I push, needing more details. “Like...what did it feel like?”

He nods, continuing though I can tell it is hard for him. “I was just fucking sixteen. She was...god, she was Roger’s lover, his girlfriend, and they were very serious. But the first time I met her again after I’d reached my maturity, I felt her come into the room. And though she was across it, and in a group of people, my eyes went instantly to her, and I was immediately aware of what she was to me. The bond – my wolf instantly knew, I instantly knew, and there was no doubting it.”

“And then for two years?” I prompt. “You just...knew?”

“It was more than just knowing,” he says shaking his head at me. “It was my wolf pining for her, and having very strong, carnal, bodily reactions to her presence whenever she was around. And she felt the same way – but Roger, we all thought, was dad’s heir. And that,” he says with a shrug, “was more important to her than the bond. At the time.”

“So, she was able to...deny the bond?”

“Not really,” he murmurs. “Her wolf, I’m sure, was as crazy for me as mine was for her. But Lydia was a very determined, calculating woman. She had a great deal of willpower, when properly incentivized.”

We both lose ourselves in our thoughts for a moment, and I have to admit that jealousy coils in me even though I know that Lydia is dead, and that our own fated bond is stronger than theirs ever was. Still...it’s not easy to think about Sinclair loving anyone else but me.

It really does make me want to defend my claim on him in a very real, bodily way.

So, on some level, I suppose I do understand his reaction last night – his very real need to end the threat to our relationship.

But as I think about it further... honestly, I’m not sure that there is a threat at all.

“What?” Sinclair asks, and I look up to see him studying me.

“I don’t know,” I say, my frown deepening.

He makes a sound low in his throat, urging me to speak, and I take a second to collect my thoughts before I cock my head to the side.

“And there was nothing like...physical in the air between you? No...literal sparks, or anything?”

“No,” he says with a frown, shaking his head. “But you’re...goddess-born, Ella, who knows what the hell goes on with you.”

I sigh, shrugging, recognizing that as a possibility. But I press forward. “And you instantly...wanted her? Like, sexually?”

Slowly, he nods, but I’m grateful he doesn’t go into detail. “It was all I thought about for two whole years, Ella. It was consuming. And I’m sure she felt it too and every mated

pair that I've ever talked to about it has felt the same. The sexual connection is... intense."

I'm quiet for a long moment before I speak again.

"Honestly, Dominic," I say quietly, "I don't feel at all like that about Calvin."

"What?" he asks, confused.

"I mean, I like him a great deal," I say, giving a little shrug, "and he's very handsome-"

Sinclair growls at this and I swat at him, scowling a little. "Would you stop?" I scold, "again, like with what I said about Roger being hot, it's just an observation – it is a fact that Calvin is a very good looking man – "

The growl deepens and I can't help it – I laugh. "Stop!" I say, swatting at him again.

"You stop!" he orders, frowning at me. ""This man put his hand on you –

he told you he thinks he's your mate, and you expect me to sit calmly while you say you think he's handsome!?"

"Okay, I take it back," I say, sighing and rolling my eyes. "He's very ugly – complete trash, face-wise. A toad – "

Sinclair groans, burying his face in the pillow, because he knows I'm lying. But I smack him again, because I want him to listen to me.

"Seriously, though," I say, sitting up a little and shaking my mate's arm until he looks at me. "Honestly, Dominic, I think there's some connection with Calvin but what you said about like, knowing instantly? Or like...pining for him, and your wolf going crazy, or anything carnal?"

Sinclair stares at me and I shake my head slowly.

"Dominic, I don't have any of that."

My mate sits up now, staring at me eagerly. "Are you serious?" he asks.

"I promise," I say, my face sincere. "I even asked my wolf when you were gone, and she said she didn't know

"She would know, Ella – "

“Well then,” I say, giving a little shrug. “Dominic...I don’t think it’s right. I don’t think he’s my fated mate.”

My big, scary, sweetheart mate gives a heavy groan then, falling back on the mattress and covering his face with his hands in relief. A huge smile finds my face as I study him, as relief sweeps through me. Because honestly – until Calvin said the word mate? I hadn’t been thinking it at all.

It was only him that put the idea in my head, that made me freak out. Because I figured he would know.

Sinclair pulls his hands down his face a little, studying me. “You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

I roll my eyes at him. “I swear on everything that matters, Dominic,” I say all in a rush, eager for him to believe me. “I’m serious – if that’s how people feel when they meet their fated mates? I do not feel that way about him, and neither does my wolf.”

My mate moves faster than I can see and I give a happy little shriek as he pulls me over the baby, tugging me tight to his chest and wrapping me up there like he’ll never let me go. I laugh a little when I realize what happened, snuggling my face against his chest and breathing in his warm, delicious scent.

“God, Ella,” he murmurs on a sigh. “I was so fucking scared -”

“I know,” I murmur back, pressing my hands against him. “I’m really glad you didn’t kill him now.”

“I’m not,” he growls, and I laugh a little. “He still made a move on you, Ella. And even if you’re not into him, he’s definitely into you.”

“Okay,” I say, admitting it a bit now and biting my lip. “I guess...he is. But Dominic, he’s not completely to blame here, all right? There is something between us and even if it’s not a mating bond...it’s something.”

Sinclair peers down at me and I look up at him for a long moment and then he nods. “I can deal with that,” he murmurs quietly, accepting it. “As long as you and me?”

“We’re good, Dominic,” I murmur, resting my head against his chest. “I’m very in love with you and nobody else. You’re my mate.”

“And you’re mine,” he says back, finality in his voice as he holds me like he’ll never let me go. “I love you so much, Ella. If I lost you...”

And I nod, understanding the sentiment even if he doesn't finish the thought out loud. I take a deep, relieved breath and peering over my mate's body to look at my little sleeping baby. Pleased, contented, I reaching out a hand to trace a soft finger down Rafe's belly.

Because nothing, nothing exists that can tear our little family apart.

And quite suddenly, after all of this?

After the stress of a sleepless night, and these insane questions, and this reaffirmation of our dedication to one another?

As I feel my mate breathing softly beneath me, and stare at my sleeping baby...I realize that I'm ready.

Even with war on the horizon, and this new looming question of what the hell is between me and this Prince of Atalaxia...

I know, without a doubt, that I'm ready for baby number two.

And I smile and turn my face to my mate, because there's no time like the present to get started trying.

Chapter 465 – Home and War

Cora

Roger and I are quiet the next morning as we go through our breakfast routine in the kitchen. It's not an awkward sort of quiet, just...us thinking our own thoughts while staying very close to one another.

We stayed up late last night, first attending to the baby. Roger was heartbroken, too, that our barely- formed child was already worried about something – and that it's all our fault. So we spent a good long time passing him comfort and happy thoughts down our bond, letting him feel reassured. When he finally drifted off to what we call sleep even though, honestly, it's probably not an accurate term Roger and I took a deep breath and finally got back to the real conversation: what the hell we're going to do.

But, of course, we didn't come up with any solutions. Because our past experiences in the last, barely-finished war have already made it clear to us that trying to make plans? It never works.

So we eventually fell asleep holding each other close, whispering promises to put each other and our family first, even as the nation and its people ask us for more.

"That's weird," Roger murmurs, flicking through his phone as he leans against the counter, a cup of coffee in hand.

"What," I ask, turning to him and blowing on my tea to cool it, "the fact that you're actually reading your messages? That you know where your phone is? That it's charged?"

He flicks his eyes up to me and smirks, but shakes his head. "No," he murmurs. "Sinclair sent me a message telling me not to come in until this afternoon. Says he needs to sleep."

My eyebrows go up in surprise. "Wow, slacking on the job, so early in his reign."

Roger laughs a little and tucks the phone away in his pajama pocket. "Nah, something's up," he says. "He wouldn't take a sick day unless he needs it. Do you think it has something to do with Ella? That crazy dinner she went to last night?"

My eyes widen as I consider it. "Maybe," I say, reaching for my own phone, hoping maybe she texted to fill me in. But I scowl when the screen comes up empty. And then I turn my head to the side a little, curious...

Because it's not like Ella to not send me ten texts in the morning – general greetings, pictures of Rafe, selfies of her with bed-hair with her gigantic mate walking around in the

background of the picture.

“Hmm,” I say, looking up at Roger. “Sis is being very quiet too.”

“Well,” he says, smirking and putting his coffee down, stepping closer and wrapping a hand around my waist to pull me close. “Either way, it means I have the morning off. What ever shall we do?”

“Oh, I’ve got some chores in mind,” I say, grinning and putting my tea down before standing on my toes so I can wrap my arms around his neck. “Some tile in the shower needs to be regrouted

“That bathroom is brand new, Cora-

“Or the garbage disposal keeps making this really weird noise -”

“You’re imagining that,” he murmurs, pulling me sharply closer. “Or it’s haunted, which is also something I can’t do anything about.”

I laugh, nudging his nose a little with mine. “Well then, there is a problem with the bed -”

“Oh really?” he says, bending a little and wrapping his hands around the back of my thighs before standing up straight and taking me with him. I grin and wrap my legs around his waist, leaning back a little so I don’t crush the baby between us.

“Mmhmm,” I say, a low and throaty affirmation. “It’s actually a problem with the sheets, underneath the blankets –”

“Well,” he says, starting out of the kitchen and heading for the stairs. “This sounds serious – we’ll have to investigate this right away -”

And I laugh as my gorgeous mate carries me upstairs, and into the bedroom, and slams the door shut behind us.

Roger and I thoroughly enjoy our morning off, so much so that we’re still laying in bed chatting hours later, all wrapped up in each other. I slip my fingers through his hair, only half listening as he tells me more about his and Sinclair’s plans to create an Alpha Academy to train young wolves to be officers in the war, staring at the shape of his moving lips and marveling at how good looking he really is

When suddenly, we hear the front door downstairs creek open and then slam shut below us.

Roger is instantly alert, his arm wrapping around me as he pulls me beneath him a bit,

his lips peeling back over his teeth as he growls at the door, tense and waiting for more hints about exactly what

“Cora!”

Roger’s body slackens as soon as Ella’s voice rings up the stairs, accompanied by her pounding feet.

I sigh, putting my hands on Roger’s chest and giving him a little shove. “Come on,” I say, “we’re going to want to get dressed before she -”

“Speak for yourself,” he murmurs, leaning back against the pillows. “She’s the one bursting into our house it’s her own fault if she sees something she doesn’t want to see –”

But I just stand up and throw his pajama pants at him before moving to the closet and pulling on a robe. I’m barely covered when Ella bursts into the room, Rafe perched on her hip.

“Cora!” she says, scowling at me, annoyed, one hand still on the door handle. “What’s wrong with you – why didn’t you answer any of my texts!?”

I shrug at her, frowning a bit. “I don’t know the phone was downstairs!”

“I needed you, Cora!” she says, hoisting the baby a little higher and frowning at me as Sinclair appears in the doorway behind her, looking sleepier than Ella does, but equally serious. Still, I ignore him for now, a little annoyed at my sister.

“I’m not at your beck and call, highness,” I say, rolling my eyes and looking around for more clothes. Because even though Roger is just languishing naked in the bed, barely covered with the sheets, I am not wolf enough yet to have that little immodesty. “Would you mind giving me a minute of privacy to get dressed?”

“This is important, Cora!” Ella protests, frowning at me and crossing her arms.

“Five minutes, Ella!” I snap, glaring at her as I turn into the walk-in closet.

“Fine,” she mutters, turning away back towards the stairs, clearly intending to meet me in the kitchen or the living room.

“Hey, Ells!” Roger calls after her retreating form. “Hey, Dominic! So nice to see you and have you acknowledge my presence in my own home!”

“Sorry, Roger!” Ella calls from the stairs. “We love you too! We just need Cora’s magic

for a minute!”

Roger frowns at me as I come out of the closet with a set of clothes in my hands and start to get dressed for the day. “Your magic?” he asks. “What, do they need a sudden storm or something?”

“Who knows,” I murmur, shaking my head, and then I glare at him. “Would you please get dressed? This family is weird enough, we don’t need to have chats about magic while one of us is naked.”

“I prefer the term ‘tastefully nude,’” he says, smirking at me as he gets up and comes to my side, giving me a sweet, thorough kiss before smacking my ass and heading towards the closet to find some clothes.

Chapter 466 – Asking Mom

“All right, Ella!” I call as I troop down the stairs, dressed for the day, Roger following behind.

“In here!” she calls, peeking out from the living room and giving me a big smile. “Also, sorry,” she adds, grimacing a bit. “We were very rude, bursting in here like that, weren’t we?”

“I’ll forgive you as soon as you give me my little nephew to hold for a few minutes,” I say, smiling and reaching for Rafe, who my sister happily hands over to me. I’m instantly gratified when he gives a squeak of happiness and reaches out his own hands, clearly recognizing me and wanting to see me as much as I want to see him.

“Yes,” Ella sighs, crossing her arms as she observes me with the baby.”

Rafe makes everything better.”

“That can be his slogan,” I say, grinning at the baby, “when he’s King.”

Ella laughs and I turn to smile at her as Roger comes into the room after me. I shift my gaze to Sinclair, who stands behind Ella, quiet with his arms crossed over his chest.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, looking between the two of them. “First you tell Roger not to come to the palace this morning, and then you’re bursting in here this afternoon? What’s up?”

“We had kind of a crazy night,” Ella says with a grimace, moving to the couch and sitting down on it. Sinclair moves to stand by her, clearly tense and still not adding anything to the conversation.

“Oh?” I ask, sitting across from my sister. Roger sits behind me on the arm of the couch, paying close attention and sending a little pulse of wonder and curiosity down our bond. He, too, is very intrigued by this.

Ella sighs and then begins to tell me all about her evening last night – first the dinner with Calvin, and then his claim to being her mate, and then Sinclair turning into a wolf and bursting out the door, seeking to hunt him down.

My eyes go wider and wider as Ella continues.

“But,” Ella says with a shrug. “Honestly, I don’t think he’s my mate, Cora. I am not...into him, in that way that mated pairs are supposed to be.”

“Really?” I ask, turning my head to the side. “I mean, he’s really good looking Ella – ”

Roger scoffs behind me and Sinclair glowers, which makes me and Ella burst into laughter.

“No,” she says, shrugging and reaching across the couch, clearly seeking her baby. I hand Rafe back to her and she pulls him into her lap, clearly deriving a lot of comfort from having him near. A little excitement twists in me, because I can’t wait to hold my baby just like that. “It’s not like that, Cora – I mean, I feel a very interesting pull towards him? And there are like, literal sparks in the air between us whenever we get close or our skin touches?”

My eyes dart up to Sinclair now, who growls behind Ella to hear her say this detail. But she just rolls her eyes and ignores him.

“But Sinclair says that...when you meet your fated mate, your wolf knows it, and you’re like...very attracted to them. Like, tear your clothes off attracted to them.” She pauses for a moment, her eyes moving between me and Roger. “Is that what it...was like? For you?”

“Well,” Roger says, his voice unusually serious. “We have a bit of a different story because Cora’s wolf was so tucked away for so long. But as soon as her wolf...woke up? For the first time?” I look over my shoulder to see him nodding vigorously. “Yeah, Ella. We knew. Immediately we knew. I mean, I knew before because of the intensity of my feelings and my attraction to her, but when our wolves found each other...”

“There was no denying it,” I finish, giving my sister a little shrug. “But Ella,” I say, frowning a little, “why did you come here? I mean, it’s a crazy story and I’m glad to know it. But why rush across town when you’ve clearly had a rough night and very little sleep?”

“Because,” she says, biting her lip a little. “We were kind of hoping that you could...ask mom.”

“Oh!” I say, blinking in surprise a little. “How...how do I do that?”

She shrugs a little. “You just like...call to her.”

“What,” Roger says, and I look up again to see him smirking. “Like, she just puts her hands to the side of her mouth and hollers?”

“Would you take this seriously?” Sinclair snaps, drawing all of our eyes to him.

“All right,” Ella murmurs, narrowing her brows at her mate and scooting forward on the couch. “You come sit here with me. It was just a joke, Dominic.”

Roger just grins but Sinclair scowls, clearly stressed, and slips in behind Ella, wrapping his arms around her. My heart goes out to him as I watch him tuck his head against hers, because as much as Ella says Calvin is not her mate? I can tell that he's stressed and wants a definite answer.

"Okay," I say as I breathe out a steady breath, reaching my hand up for Roger's. He gives me his, not asking why I want it, but I just want him close. "So, like, inside? Where the gift is? I just...call to her?"

"Yeah," Ella says, giving me a little smile as she leans into the man who is undeniably her mate. But...well, Sinclair had two. I guess it's possible, would even be...symmetrical, for Ella to have a fated mate as well.

"I'd ask myself," Ella says with a shrug, "but I burned up the bond when the priestess tried to take Rafe."

Ella hugs her little baby closer and I give her a sad smile, thinking about everything that my sweet sister has gone through in the fight for her family. And suddenly, all I want to do is contact mom even just to give her a piece of my mind for giving Ella such a tough path. So, I squeeze Roger's hand, and I sink inside of myself, searching... reaching...

And it takes a few minutes, but suddenly I come to a very steady place within myself, where my gift glows with a warm lavender light. And then I call out without words...

Mom?

There's a pause, and then a pulse within the gift, and then it burns brighter. And when I open my eyes...she's suddenly there. The goddess, transparent, incorporeal, in my living room.

"Oh," I say, jumping a little in surprise.

Because she's just there.

"Hello, Cora," she says, giving me a delighted smile.

"Hey, mom," I reply, my voice quavering a little. Because she's so beautiful, and I can feel the love she has for all of us radiating from her, so much so that it brings a little bit of a tear to my eye.

"Um," Roger says, and I glance up at him to see him looking at me like I'm a little crazy.

I frown at him and then look around at the rest of my family. "You can't see her?" I ask, a little surprised.

"Nope," Ella says, grinning at me and laughing a little, hugging Rafe tight. "From our perspective, it looks like you just called the armchair mom."

I laugh a little and gesture towards her. "Well, she's right there," I say with a shrug.

"We believe you," Roger says, giving my hand a little pulse.

"Time is short, Cora," my mother says, turning her head to peer at me. "I cannot appear consciously like this to you for long, or frequently. But I could tell by your request that you needed my help."

"Yes," I say, sitting up a little straighter. "Um, do you know what happened with Ella? Or do I need to tell you?"

A little humor passes unintentionally down the bond between me and Roger, and I can tell that he thinks it's very funny that I look like I'm talking to the armchair. But I just roll my eyes and ignore him.

"I know everything, Cora," she says, her smile beatific.

Chapter 467 – Seeds

Cora

The Goddess' smile only broadens as she continues her thought. "But you can tell your sister that I have not been so generous as to send her two mates at once. And because I know it will worry her now, you can tell her that I have made her only one mate in this world, even though her mate had two."

I grin a little then, thinking about her phrasing it as a generosity and not the torture that it clearly is for Sinclair. "Why, though?" I ask, suddenly curious. "Why did he get two?"

"Because," the goddess says, laughing a tinkling little laugh. "I have bigger plans, Cora, that stretch generations into the future. One day, Dominic's experience loving two mates will help him empathize with another who likewise struggles." She smirks a little at me. "Though...maybe don't tell him that," she wrinkles her nose playfully, "Might be more fun if you don't."

I laugh suddenly, delighted at the realization that my mother the Goddess is a little bit of trickster. How have we missed that before?

"So, what's the deal with the Prince, then?" I ask, and I ignore Roger as he mumbles something behind me about not understanding what the hell is going on.

"The bond with the Prince," mom says with a shrug, "it is something else. But some things, my love, must remain a mystery. The connection that I have built between Ella and the Atalaxian Prince – it is merely a seed." She glances at my stomach, and then her eyes move to Ella. "Seeds, like children, take time to grow. But when they do..."

She smiles then and leaves the thought unfinished, shaking her hair back from her shoulders. "Is there anything else, daughter?" she asks, beginning to fade just a little bit.

"The baby?" I ask, suddenly desperate to know while I have her here. My hand moves instantly to my stomach. "Is he... will he be all right?"

She grins at me. "Your child will be born safe and sound, Cora, do not worry." A little laugh rings through the air as she fades almost completely from sight. "And tell Ella that I love her, and to keep trying. I am eager to lay eyes on my first granddaughter."

And quite suddenly, she's gone.

I blink at the sudden absence in the room and then take a deep breath before looking around at my family, who all stare at me.

"That was super weird," Roger says, his eyes wide.

“Well, you probably also looked like a lunatic talking to the air,” I say, rolling my eyes at him, “the night she visited you on the boat.”

“Cora,” Sinclair murmurs, and all of our eyes turn to where he’s sitting behind Ella, his face tucked miserably against his palm. “Please...please tell me what she said. I’m dying here.”

“Aww, Dominic,” I murmur, and I consider for just a second dragging it out a little further just to tease him. But he’s so miserable that I can’t. “Calvin isn’t Ella’s fated mate. She said that she only made Ella one mate, and it’s you.”

“Ohmygod,” he whispers, all in a rush, and the tension visibly goes out of my sister and her mate. My heart breaks a little when I see Sinclair’s shoulders begin to shake with the relief of it as Ella presses herself back against him, murmuring sweet reassurances.

I smile as I watch them, but I’m a little relieved when Roger slips onto the couch behind me, pulling me into his lap. I turn my attention to him as he wraps his arms around me, giving Ella and Sinclair a minute.

“What about me?” Roger murmurs, nudging me with his nose. “How many do I get?”

I lean back from him, suddenly a little appalled at his question. “You get one, Roger Sinclair,” I growl, grabbing his shirt in my fist.

“Awww,” he says, his face falling in pretend disappointment. “I was hoping for like eight or nine. Really start a little harem for myself -”

“I would kill them all,” I hiss, though I start to laugh. “”Though I probably wouldn’t need to – they’d get one look at you and all reject the bond immediately – ”

“That’s just what I’d tell you,” he murmurs, grinning at me and pulling me close. “When secretly, I’d keep them all in a little cabin out in the woods, my secret wives – ”

I burst into laughter at the idea, but my mate and I both turn to my sister when she calls my name.

“What else did she say?” Ella asks, her face happy and at peace. So, I tell her everything strange thing mom said about the bond being a seed, and seeds, like children, needing time to grow.

“That is so weird,” Ella breathes, her face scrunched up in confusion.

“Cora,” Sinclair says, his deep voice still very serious despite his mate’s clear peace and

happiness. "You asked 'why did he get two.' What...what did she say to that?"

I grin at him now, feeling a bit of my mother's mischief coming through to me now. "She said Roger got two pop tarts this morning because they come in a pack," I say, my voice slow and resonating with wisdom as I grin at him, "it's only right that they be eaten together."

Sinclair narrows his eyes at me as Ella laughs. "Tell me," the King orders, his Alpha coming forward in the command.

But Ella just turns to him with a scoff. "Cora's conversation with our mother is hers, Dominic. You don't get to make that demand of her."

"She told you the answer to your question," he grumbles, glaring at her. Ella sighs and takes his face in her hands. "Does it really matter?" she asks, shaking her head. "I am your mate, Dominic, and you are mine, and that's enough."

"Unless he has a third out there somewhere," Roger murmurs unhelpfully, smirking.

Ella gasps and glares at Roger, but I just laugh and start to stand up. "Enough of this," I say, getting to my feet. "Are we done with all this serious Goddess chatter? You have a country to run, and I have a shift at the clinic this evening."

Everyone starts to stand then as well, Ella coming close and wrapping me in a hug. "Thank you, Cora," she whispers to me, very seriously. "I'm so grateful."

"Easily done," I say, smiling down at her. She starts to pull away from me but I hold her close for a moment longer, bringing my lips close to her ear so that I can whisper. "She said to keep trying, Ells – she wants to see her granddaughter soon."

When Ella pulls away from me she's beaming with happiness, her eyes starting to fill with tears as she clutches Rafe close. "Really?" she breathes.

I nod eagerly and Ella spins away, throwing herself into Sinclair's arms with a happy squeak.

"What?" Sinclair asks, frowning and looking between me and his mate. "What did you say to her?"

"Would you stop being so serious, Dominic?" I say, rolling my eyes at him as Roger comes and wraps an arm around my waist. "It was all good news this morning from our little chat with the Goddess – you need to cheer up! You don't need to know all the details."

He sighs and glares at me a little, though his sigh lets me know that he realizes that I'm right. "You're really not going to tell me?" he says, chagrined. "What she said, about me having two mates?"

"She told me not to," I say with a grin. "I think she wants you to figure it out yourself. But...I can tell you that she definitely gave you two mates for a reason."

Sinclair's sigh is deep but I see a great deal of contentment come to his expression as he and Ella say their goodbyes and head out to their car, where several guards are waiting. As they go, Roger stands close at my side.

"Any goddess messages for me?" he murmurs, smiling down at me.

"Nah," I say, grinning up at him. " Just that the baby will be born happy and healthy. But that's all I asked."

He smiles at me, pleased but curious. " Really?" he says, stepping close and pressing a palm to my cheek. "You didn't ask anything else? You're not curious?"

"Roger," I say, shaking my head up at him as I wrap my arms around his waist, "I am so curious about our future and how our lives are going to unfold. But I have no real interest in being an oracle. I want to find out as we live it. It's enough for me."

"And you're enough for me," he murmurs back, and then he leans in, giving me a perfect kiss.

Chapter 468 – Departure

Ella

Sinclair and I dress very formally that night, knowing that how we bid our farewell to the Atalaxian delegation is going to be something that we handle with a great deal of care, especially as we know that Calvin will be there. We even wear our crowns, hoping that they oblige the Atalaxians to see us as representatives of the state which they intend to destroy.

Rafe, unfortunately, has other ideas about his formality.

“Oh, god,” I sigh when he shrieks and pulls his tiny crown off for the third time. “Dominic, he won’t wear it

“So don’t make him,” Sinclair says with a grin, coming to stand close to me in our closet, putting his hand on my back and peering down at our son.

Honestly, he’s a baby -”

“He is the future King – “I huff as I slide Rafe’s crown around my wrist like a bracelet. “Without the crown he’s just our little baby meatball – ”

Sinclair laughs now, taking the baby from me and holding him high up in the air, making Rafe shriek with laughter. “Did you hear how your mommy talks about you, Rafe!?” Sinclair calls, pretending to be appalled. Rafe just giggles harder, delighted. “A future King, and she calls you a meatball!”

“He is,” I say, laughing and reaching for him. “He’s my little meatball, though,” I murmur, taking him back into my arms and leaning into my mate. “He’s just getting so big. And he’s very round.”

“Wolf babies grow faster than human babies,” Sinclair murmurs, leaning down to kiss me on the cheek and then Rafe on my head.

“That’s horrible,” I murmur, clutching my little baby to me. I turn my mouth down at my baby. “You quit it, Rafe. Stay little.”

“Not forever,” he says with a sigh. “ Just through these first couple months so that they’re stronger, then it kind of evens out. But yeah...he’s going to start getting teeth soon.”

“What?” I gasp, appalled and looking up at Sinclair. “He’s too little for that!”

“Sorry, love,” Sinclair murmurs, kissing my hair. “Our little pup needs his fangs.”

“Well,” I sigh, turning to the room when Sinclair tugs me in that direction. “As soon as those show up, I am done breastfeeding.”

Sinclair laughs with me as we make our way to the door. But both of us grow serious as we pass through it, because while we’re certainly able to distract ourselves for a few minutes?

Well. We’re still a nation on the brink of war, and it doesn’t look like there’s anything we can do about it.

At dinner we do our very best, trying every angle we can think of to get the Atalaxians to turn. Henry’s there, doing the same, though Cora and Roger opted out of this one. I can’t say I blame them – Sinclair told me on the ride to their house this morning that he’s asked Roger to take charge of the military, and I have to say – it’s probably given them a lot to think about.

But despite our best efforts, the Atalaxians turn away all of our last- ditch offers and ideas, apparently determined to go to war. Only Calvin, sitting across the table from us, looks towards us with any real regret in his expression.

Not that Sinclair is in any mood to look favorably on anything that Calvin says or does. Every time the Prince visibly moves or breathes, Sinclair sends a growl his way. I keep having to put a hand on my mate’s knee, reminding him to reel it in.

“Let’s not have any regicide tonight,” I murmur quietly as the meal breaks up.

“It’s not regicide if you kill a Prince out of the line of succession,” Sinclair mutters back, sounding tempted and making me laugh.

I stand up with a sigh, turning my face up to my mate. “Dominic, I think I have to do this on my own,” I say, knowing that it’s time to have the difficult conversation with Calvin.

“Absolutely not,” Sinclair snaps, livid.

“I’m serious,” I insist, looking up at him with clear eyes. Rafe, sleeping in my arm, fusses a little, I think disturbed by our heightened emotions on this subject.

“I’ll keep it together,” Sinclair growls, his words belied by a vicious snarl as he looks over to the corner of the room, where Calvin is clearly waiting to face us, his shoulders tense even though he has calmly slipped his hands into his pockets.

I give Calvin a little smile, honestly a bit impressed with the coolness with which he’s handling this. Not everyone would be able to stand straight and look Dominic Sinclair in the eye the night after hitting on his mate.

I smirk a little at the thought and quickly pass Rafe into Sinclair's arms. "Here," I murmur. "Just – go stand outside of the door, and I'll keep our bond wide open the whole time so you know exactly how I'm feeling, okay? And if I'm even the least bit uncomfortable, you can come in and bite his head off."

Sinclair's growl deepens, but he takes the baby and glares over at Calvin. "Dominic," I say, putting a hand on his arm and making him look back at me. "

Please remember that I have a bond with this man. My mother wants us to have a connection. Any time you feel like killing him, just look down at Rafe and let his cuteness lull you into a new calm."

I stand on my toes to give my gigantic scary mate a kiss on the cheek, and then I step away, heading for Calvin. Sinclair moves to the door, grumbling his discontent. I smile a little when I see him stand just outside of it so that his shadow still falls into the room.

"Highness," Calvin murmurs, giving me a short bow as the last of the Atalaxians filter out of the room past my mate.

"Ella," I insist, stepping close and smiling at him, even as I feel a rumble of Sinclair's unhappiness shiver down the bond. I smile, ignoring it, and gesture quickly to the other side of the room, where a couch and comfortable chairs wait. "Will you please come and speak for a little, Calvin? We have...to talk."

Calvin, to his credit, just glances once towards the door where Sinclair stands before sighing and heading towards the back of the room. I follow, sitting next to Calvin on the couch, careful to leave enough space for a person to sit between us.

We're going to war with his people anyway, Sinclair mutters directly into my mind from outside the door. Just let me rip his head off.

Part of mom's plan! I quip, again holding back a grin. Look at Rafe! Take comfort in his cute tiny face!

Calvin turns his head as he studies me, perhaps wondering where my little smile is coming from. But then he sighs, hanging his head a little. "Are you rejecting our bond, Ella?" he asks, as if afraid of the answer.

"Calvin," I say, leaning forward, wanting to touch him but refraining. "There's no bond to reject. Or at least, not the kind that you think there is."

Calvin looks up at me, shocked. "Ella," he says, shaking his head. "Yes, there is. You're my mate!"

Chapter 469 – Friendship Across Boundaries

Ella

I ignore the soft growl that rumbles from the doorway, though Calvin glances briefly in that direction.

“No, Calvin,” I say, shaking my head softly. “We did a little bit of research this afternoon. And I’m sorry to say it if it makes you sad, but you’re not my mate.”

“What?” he breathes, confused, his eyebrows knitting together. “But – ”

“Why do you think you are?” I ask, honestly conflicted now.

And Calvin sweetly and awkwardly blushes, looking down at the carpet. “My wolf is... pretty convinced, Ella,” he murmurs, probably fully aware that the words are enough to set Sinclair off again.

“Really?” I ask, pushing now, “Because my wolf – she says that you’re important to me, but she wasn’t sure enough to give it the name mate. And everyone else I’ve asked, Calvin...they were sure. Is your wolf absolutely positive?”

He sighs now, looking down at his hands as he perhaps consults with his wolf inside. “It’s...the strongest connection I’ve ever felt, Ella,” he murmurs. “With anyone. Is it...is it not enough? Even if my wolf feels a little bit of doubt, and can’t give you a certain yes?”

And suddenly my heart breaks for this man who I realize is...lonely. Who had an arranged marriage to a woman I’m not sure he loves, who is surrounded by a Kingdom full of people whose deepest beliefs he at least doubts, if not outright disbelieves. Calvin – he saw the bond between us and he grasped at it desperately, wanting it.

Wanting the different life I potentially offered one with love in it, and a new world full of different ideas.

My heart – it absolutely breaks for him, and down the bond I feel Sinclair’s own pity as he feels my emotions along with me.

But still I can’t love him just because he wants me to. I have a mate whom I love very, very much.

“Maybe it would be enough,” I say softly, “in a different time, a different... life. But Calvin, we asked and had it confirmed. You’re not my mate – I only have one. And it’s Dominic.”

Calvin looks up at me now, his face twisted in confusion. “Who on earth would you ask about that?”

“Well,” I say, smiling a little bit. ” She’s not precisely on earth -”

Ella, Dominic says down our bond in warning. Because the Atalaxians – they don’t know anything about my divine origins right now, or at least we don’t think they do. We honestly don’t know how much Xander told him, but since they didn’t bring it my or Cora’s powers in the peace talks as a negotiating point, we’re assuming Xander kept any knowledge of or lineage and our gifts to himself.

He deserves to know, Dominic, I reply as Calvin stares at me in confusion. It’s his bond too.

“Can we trust you, Calvin?” I ask quietly, leaning forward and raising a single eyebrow at Calvin.

Slowly, Calvin nods and I bizarrely feel a little pulse of truth down...down what I can only assume is a new bond between myself and this prince. My lips part in surprise as Calvin stares at me in confusion, feeling it too, and then I feel almost a sigh down my bond with Sinclair as he gives me tacit permission to continue.

And so I tell Calvin everything – about the Goddess being my biological mother, and contacting her today, and everything she said about our bond being a seed. By the end of it, Calvin stares at me with wide eyes.

“God,” he says, leaning back against the couch’s arm. “Now I’m just... embarrassed. Here I was, ready to confess my devotion to you, and all along it was...nothing romantic. Not at all. Instead just a seed, whatever that means.”

Sinclair lets out another low growl from the doorway, letting Calvin know that he needs to watch himself, but I ignore him, reaching out a hand between us. “Just because it’s not romantic doesn’t mean it’s not important,” I say quietly.

Calvin reaches out as well, hovering his hand above mine until we feel that pulse between us. Until the glow forms between our hands, eventually raising sparks in the air. We both stare at it and a smile finds my lips.

“See?” I say. “Magic.”

“Incredible,” he murmurs, shaking his head. But then he pulls his hand away and tucks it into his pocket, glancing towards the door. “I’m sorry... I realize what I did was selfish, and hasty, and it likely caused you a great deal of stress.”

“Stop,” I say, scootching forward across the couch now so that we sit close together. “Calvin, you have nothing to be embarrassed about – ”

He huffs a laugh, looking down into his lap. "I was ready to leave my wife, Ella," he murmurs, "to leave my entire country behind-"

"No," I interrupt, and he looks up to see me shaking my head. "You'd have gone home, Calvin. For your children. And eventually, you would have figured out that what's between us? It's special, but it's friendship. And you'd have been glad for it."

Calvin sighs and raises a hand, pressing it softly to my cheek. "For what might have been, Ella," he murmurs, "I'll at least treasure that always."

The connection burns between us, humming through me and raising the hairs on my neck. I stare at him, smiling a little, marveling at the magic that swirls in the air. But before I can get truly lost in it, someone clears their throat from the doorway.

I smile as my eyes fall on my mate, my sweet baby in his arms, glaring at both of us. Rafe lets out a little happy squeal and waves his hand, clearly choosing to respond to my emotions instead of his father's. Calvin hastily drops his hand from my cheek.

"I should go," Calvin murmurs, starting to stand.

"Do you have to?" I say, sorry to see him leave. There's so much left here we need to explore –

"Yes," Sinclair and Calvin say at once, making me grin and look between them.

"All right," I say, putting my hands up and admitting when I've been outvoted. "But Calvin, you always have friends here. I hope that you truly believe that. The Goddess has wrought a bond between us, though it may be a mystery why for a long, long time."

"And you'll always have a friend in Atalaxia, though I may be the only one," he says with a little shrug. Then he looks over at Rafe, sleeping in Sinclair's arms. "Though I hope the numbers grow as our children do."

"Me too," I say, standing and daring to put a hand on his shoulder, feeling the little pulse pass through me like a zap of electricity. Calvin grins at me a little when he feels it too.

Enough, Sinclair says in my mind, and so I take my hand away, though I hope Calvin doesn't notice.

Calvin looks at me for a long, long moment before he nods once and turns. Then he nods tensely to Sinclair as he crosses the room. He takes a moment to study Rafe before he walks silently out the door.

I sigh as I watch my friend leave. He doesn't look back.

Sinclair slowly walks to my side, wrapping a supportive arm around me when I press myself against him. "Are you all right?" he murmurs.

I look up at him. "Yeah," I sigh. "I wish that it wasn't so awkward now. I mean, I really like him, Dominic. He feels like an old friend. I don't want to part on bad terms."

"It's not bad terms," he says quietly, his lips turning up at the corner. "He's just disappointed because he thought he was finding the love of his life a very pretty love of his life at that – and as it turns out it's just some weird sparky Goddess bond that does not get you in his bed."

I laugh out loud at the bluntness of my mate's words, shaking my head at him and wrapping my arms around his waist. "Don't sound so smug about it, Dominic." I can't help a little smile though.

"I'll be as smug as I want," he says, smirking at me before dipping his head to press a kiss to my mouth. "I get you in my bed, after all."

"My bed," I say, narrowing my eyes. "I picked it."

"I paid for it," he counters. I laugh, and when I do Rafe fusses and reaches for me, sending a little pulse of want down our bond.

"Ohhh baby," I say, taking Rafe in my arms and cuddling him close. "You're right, let's get you to bed, little boy."

And even as I walk quietly back to my room with my baby in my arms and my mate at my side, a little coil of grief still curls in me.

Because even if I have a new friend in Atalaxia, one my mom picked out specifically for me?

Tomorrow, we still go to war.

Chapter 470 – War

Ella

The next day, Cora and Roger come over early. Roger and Sinclair head out, their faces solemn, to speak with their aids and their advisors regarding how to respond to the news we know is inevitably coming. Our reconnaissance teams told us that the Atalaxian delegation did indeed return home last night and were apparently in council until dawn.

Which suggests that at any moment now, they'll declare war.

Sinclair, I know, is spending a great deal of time deciding how to publicly respond. I think that he and Roger right now are recording a message that will go out to the nation as soon as the war is declared. But Cora and I?

Well.

We're just...being moms.

"Ella," she says, sighing and holding Rafe out towards me in my closet, wrinkling her nose. "I think your precious future King needs to be changed."

I sigh, my sweater only half over my head. "So? Go change him."

When I pull my sweater down and settle it neatly over my stomach, I see her grinning at me, my baby still outstretched in her arms. "Nope," she says, shaking her head. "Your baby, your diaper."

"You're going to regret that policy," I say, taking Rafe from her with raised brows, "in juuuust about three and a half months, Cora."

"And for three and a half months, I will be diaper free!" she calls after me with a laugh as I carry my smelly baby over to his changing table in the bedroom.

Rafe grins at me, looking honestly a little proud of himself, and I can't help but laugh as I lay him down and quickly change him. "Little Rafe," I coo, smiling down into his perfect face and tickling his belly, "getting so big! Do you want to try an apple today? Or some avocado?"

As I finish changing Rafe, Cora comes out of the closet, changed into a comfortable set of my clothes. She came to the palace today in more formal clothing, but as soon as Sinclair let her know that she probably wouldn't be required to appear or speak she immediately expressed her intention to change.

I smile at her, picking up the baby, my eyes going to where her little baby bump is clearly

evident under her sweatshirt.

"I know," she says, rolling her eyes and laughing as she comes over to me. "I'm getting huge."

"Oh, no you're not," I say, laughing as we together move into the living area through the next door and settle onto the couch. "Trust me, you'll know you're huge when you can't even see your feet."

Cora does look down at her feet as she tucks them up beneath her on the couch, her hands going to either side of her belly. "It just goes so fast, these wolf pregnancies," she says, shaking her head. "Human moms get nine months to adjust; it's kind of crazy that wolf mothers only get two-thirds of that time."

"Or less," I say, raising my eyebrows. "I didn't even make it to six months."

"I wonder how long mine will be," she murmurs, still studying her belly, smiling down at her little baby-to-be." No way of knowing, with this hybrid stuff."

"Surprises are always exciting," I say, resting back on the couch and holding my baby close to my chest, turning him a little so he can look at his auntie. Rafe giggles a little, the sweetest sound in the world.

"Not when the surprise results in a pup," Cora murmurs, and I laugh at her displeased tone. "I'd like to know, to have a timeline."

"Timelines are just you trying to control the chaos, sis," I murmur, resting my head against my baby's. "And with children – and this family?" I shake my head a little. "Maybe it's better to just lean into the unknown. There's no way of predicting or controlling what will come next."

"Yeah, well," Cora sighs, looking up at me now. "With war on the horizon? And Roger looking like he's going to be in the midst of it all?" she shakes her head. "Forgive me, Ella, if I lean into my desire for increased control a little more instead."

I nod, understanding her. Before I can say anything else, though, the door opens and Roger and Sinclair come through, their hands shockingly empty of tablets, phones, paperwork – any of the usual accoutrements of running the nation that I'm so used to seeing them carry these days.

"What," I say, frowning up at my mate as he comes to stand behind me. "All done work for the day?"

"Nothing more we can do," he murmurs. "Budge over I want to sit."

I grin, scooting forward almost halfway across the couch to make room for him to sit down behind me. Cora wordlessly makes more room, going to sit on Roger's lap and draping her legs over the side of the armchair on which he settles. I lean back against my mate, pleased when he slips an arm around me. My smile grows when I see Roger press a kiss to Cora's jaw, and then another on the mating mark he placed high on her neck.

"So?" I say, turning a little to look at Sinclair, finding his eyes already on me. "Is it done?"

"It is," he replies with a little sigh. Then he reaches for the remote and presses a few buttons, turning on the television that hangs on the far wall. The channel immediately turns to a news venue, and words stretch across the screen.

WAR DECARED

Not wanting to hear the details he already knows, Sinclair presses mute and wraps his arms more tightly around me. I sigh, pressing myself against him, and then I dip my head again to press another kiss to Rafe's soft hair.

"We tried so hard to avoid it," I murmur.

"They know they have the upper hand," Sinclair replies, and I can feel him shake his head, feel his disappointment down the bond. "It's a gamble – but if they win? The rewards will be worth it. Moon Valley is incredibly valuable, both in land and intellectual resources."

"Which means they'll fight very hard to take it," Roger sighs. "It's going to be...a long war."

"How long?" I murmur, looking down at the top of Rafe's head, so glad that he's oblivious.

"Long enough," Sinclair says quietly behind me, "that it's unlikely he'll grow up knowing peace, Ella. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," I say, my reply instant – because it's really, really not his fault. And I bolster myself then, knowing that Sinclair is as worried as I am. Knowing that he needs me to be strong for him, as he is for me. I work to put a smile on my face, to make myself feel the hope that I know lives within me, even though my heart hurts.

"At least," I say, turning to look up at Sinclair, letting him see that hope, "Rafe's got a big strong papa to protect him."

“Oh, he doesn’t need me,” Sinclair replies, laughing a little and reaching down to take Rafe’s tiny hands in his own giant mitts, moving Rafe’s hands in quick jabs to make it look like he’s punching. I laugh to see it. “Our boy’s a fighter, Ella. Born that way.”

I bite my lip, because I wanted Rafe to choose his future to decide to be a fighter if he wants to be, or an artist if that speaks to him more. Or both. Or something in between.

But, well. We all grow up in worlds that shape us beyond our own desires. And if our hearts are true...well, they lead us to what was meant for us anyway, right? Despite all obstacles.

“He’s going to have a beautiful life,” I murmur, stroking my baby’s hair. “No matter what Atalaxia throws at us. We’re going to give it to him.”

“That’s right,” Sinclair says, kissing my head. I turn my face up to him and happily accept the next kiss, which he places on my mouth.

“Don’t forget about our baby,” Roger calls, frowning at us. I grin as I turn back to my sister and her mate, curled up in their chair. “His life is going to be even better.”

“Really, Roger?” Sinclair says, his voice dry. “We have to get competitive about this too?”

“Damn right we do,” Cora says, a wicked grin on her lips that makes me laugh. “Our kid is going to be even happier than yours.”

“Challenge accepted,” I say, pretending to glare at both of them. “Whoever’s kid has the better life wins.”

And we all laugh a little, because we know that both boys are winners here, with a family like this to fight for them.

“Whatever happens,” Sinclair says, looking around at all of us, “we have each other. And that’s all that matters.”

“Precisely,” Cora says with a nod, her hand tracing idly over her stomach. “Whatever this world throws at us, we can face it.”

And I hold my baby tight, and lean back against my mate, and smile around at my family, knowing in my heart that they’re right.

Because I’ve got big plans for our future – plans I haven’t quite shared with them yet. But I’m so grateful to have such a strong family by my side, through the good times and the bad.

Chapter 471 – Autumn Turns

Ella

While we spent the rest of the day that war was declared between Moon Valley and Atalaxia quietly together, Henry joining us for lunch and then a peaceful dinner, the three months that followed?

They flew by at a baffling pace.

A lot of it was Roger and Sinclair working their tails off, not only getting our military whipped into shape and handling international relations to make sure that we have a variety of pledged allies, but also dealing with an increasingly-mobile wolf baby and a very, very pregnant Cora.

“I hate this,” Cora grumbles, flopping back onto my bed and pushing herself up against the cushions, her hand pressed against her ever-aching back. “I’m never getting pregnant again.”

“Well, it’s not like you did it intentionally the first time,” I say, grinning at her and sitting down on the edge of the bed, Rafe wiggling in my arms. “I doubt mom is going to give you a lot of choice about the second time, it being Roger’s destiny to be a father of many hybrids.”

“Whatever,” Cora mutters, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. “We’ll get him a surrogate. Six surrogates. However many he wants. He teased me about having seven mates a while ago and I said no way then, but now I’m rethinking this policy.”

“Birth and pregnancy are beautiful, Cora,” I say in a too-reverent scolding voice, and when she opens one eye to glare at me we both burst into laughter.

“Oh my god,” she murmurs, sighing and sitting up a little, stroking her hands over her seriously gigantic belly. “I mean, I know I love the kid – but my human body is ready for this little wolf to be born.”

“I still can’t believe you haven’t told me his name,” I sigh, sitting Rafe down on the comforter and grabbing his leg when he immediately tries to scurry away. He’s nearly eight months now and he’s big. And fast. Rafe gives a little squeak of protest but I tickle him as I pull him back, making him laugh. Then I reach for an apple slice on a little plate by the bed and hand it to him. Rafe takes it eagerly, not crawling away anymore because the only thing he’s more interested in than exploring is eating.

I smirk at my boy, tickled at the sight of him fascinated by his apple. And then I turn my attention back to my sister.

“Roger and I just want to keep the name to ourselves until he’s born,” Cora says, smiling. “The whole nation is following my pregnancy, after all,” she continues, rolling her eyes, “we at least deserve one little thing to ourselves, right?”

I shrug, conceding that what she says is true. In the first months of the war people really have rallied around Cora, excited about the birth of what they’ve called the Baby Duke as a bright spot in increasingly dark news from the war front.

It’s not that we’re doing poorly in the war in fact, Sinclair, Roger, and Henry predicted that the first few months would be hard. We, after all, are a nation with new leadership and dwindled military forces after our civil war. The important thing, our men have told us, is merely to hold the line and delay true action until we’ve had a little time to build our forces.

Calvin, to everyone’s surprise but mine, has been a huge help in this. Even though I haven’t had any word from him, our reconnaissance has reported that he’s taken a much more active role in Atalaxia, speaking out against the war and delaying forward motion where he can.

A friend indeed, I think to myself, smiling a little as I hand Rafe another piece of apple.

“He’s been eating a lot of solids lately,” Cora says, and I look up to see her considering Rafe.

“Well, I don’t think anyone produces enough breastmilk to feed this little meatball all alone,” I say, grinning and leaning close to my baby, sniffing his hair. “He’s so hungry.”

“Ella,” Cora says, her voice dry, “he’s not a meatball anymore. He’s a meatloaf.”

“Don’t be so mean – “I scowl at her, but I laugh at the same time.

“It’s not mean, it’s true,” she says, laughing with me. “I mean, he’s eight months, but he’s what...thirty pounds?”

“Thirty-five,” I say, smiling at my little boy.

“He’s a giant!”

“You’ve seen his dad,” I say, rolling my eyes and laying down behind my baby so that I can see my sister and use my body as a block to keep Rafe from crawling off the bed. “And it’s not like Roger is a little guy. Your own boy is going to be a meatloaf too, eight or nine months from now.”

Cora laughs at this and grimaces.” So,” she says, turning her head, narrowing her eyes

at me a bit more. " Have you...stopped breastfeeding?"

"Mostly," I say, trying to be casual.

Because I know what she's getting at here and it's not something I'm ready to chat about. I haven't even told Sinclair what I'm trying to do, let alone Cora. "Sometimes I breastfeed before bed – helps him sleep."

It's a lie, though. I stopped doing that a few weeks ago. Cora grins at me a little, seeing through it.

"Ella," she says, laughing and leaning forward towards me. "Why don't you just talk to me about this!? Everyone knows that you're trying to have another baby – "

"Cora!" I shout, sitting up and whipping a throw pillow at her, which she swats down, laughing. "Nobody knows that!"

"Mom knew it," she says, tucking the pillow behind her back.

"Mom is an all-knowing goddess," I counter, rolling my eyes.

"And seriously?" she says, "Sinclair, who watches you like a hawk, has no idea?"

"That honestly surprises me too," I say, leaning back down on the bed and giving in, having this conversation even though I don't think I'm ready for it. "But he's so busy I think he's distracted and hasn't put the pieces together."

"So why don't you tell him?"

"Cora," I say, my face falling now a little bit with worry. "You of all people should know why."

"What? I " and then her face falls too. "Oh, Ells," she says, shaking her head. "It's not going to be like that again."

And I feel tears prick my eyes as I look down at the comforter suddenly overwhelmed with the memories. Because – honestly, I have done this all before. I spent years trying to get pregnant and it never took. Of course, we didn't know then that I couldn't get pregnant with a human partner, and that's obviously changed now.

But the emotions? And the waiting? And the not getting pregnant?

Because I have been trying for months now...

And I'm not pregnant yet.

"It is like that again," I say quietly, not looking at my sister.

"Hey," she says, moving forward on the bed and reaching out a hand to my shoulder. I look up at her, and she points at Rafe. "What's this?"

"What?"

"What's this?" she says again insistent.

"It's Rafe, Cora – duh, and he's not a this –"

"It's your baby," she says, shaking me a little. "And if you want another one, you can have another one, okay? It's foretold! You've had visions about this!" she says as tears fill my eyes as I get precisely the pep talk I need from my no-nonsense sister.

"Then why hasn't it happened yet?" I ask, quietly.

"Maybe you need a little help," she says, giving me a shrug and a smile. "I mean, a medical procedure helped you get pregnant the first time – maybe you and Sinclair just need a little medical assistance to get pregnant, like thousands of women do. And hey, that's what I'm for!"

"I wanted to do it naturally this time," I sigh, glaring at her, a little jealous. "Like you, when you got knocked up the first time you had sex with your mate."

"Yes," she says, looking at me earnestly before glancing down at her gigantic stomach. "And now I am miserable, and can't sleep, and pee every five minutes –"

I burst out laughing, shaking my head.

"The grass is always greener!" she says, giving my shoulder a little shake before leaning back against the pillows. "But seriously, Ella, you just finished breastfeeding – and maybe it just takes time. Maybe just...trust the process. Have a lot of sex. And if in a few months things are still stalled? We'll try something else."

"Okay," I say with a big sigh, rolling onto my back and taking my baby with me. Rafe gives a happy little squeal as I pull him onto my stomach, cuddling him there. "Thanks, Cora," I add. "I needed that."

"Well, I need a c-section, immediately," she murmurs, disgruntled. "Can you please arrange that? You're the Queen."

“Just trust the process, Cora,” I say, grinning as I throw her words back at her, making her groan. “Have a lot of sex – if in a few weeks your baby still isn’t born – ”

“Weeks!” she moans, tilting her head back and pressing her eyes shut. “No way, Ella. I’m not making it weeks. This baby has to come immediately or I’m going to lose my mind. Now, preferably, or tomorrow at the latest.”

I grin at my sister, feeling sorry that she’s so miserable but also happy and excited.

But if she’d only known then how prophetic that last statement would be

Chapter 472 – Alpha Academy

Ella

The door opens then, Roger and Sinclair coming through.

“No!” Cora calls, pulling the pillow out from behind her back and flinging it at Roger. “Not you, who did this to me! The source of my misery!”

Roger just grins as he snatches the pillow out of the air. “And how is my gorgeous mate, mother of my child and heir?” he murmurs, quickly crossing to her and wrapping her in his arms.

“Villain,” she growls, grabbing him by the shirt and pulling him closer, pretending to be mad but unable to hide her smile. “You’re going to pay for this!”

Roger just snarls and pulls Cora closer, covering her face and head with kisses that make her shriek and swat at him, laughing.

I grin as Sinclair comes over to me, leaning over to look down at me and Rafe. Rafe squeals happily when he sees his papa, reaching his arms out and asking to be picked up. Sinclair beams as he lifts his baby and swings him into the air, which makes Rafe laugh wildly.

I grin, happiness racing through me as I watch them, and then as I look over at Cora and Roger, who are smiling happily now with him tucked close to her on the bed, asking how she’s feeling. Cora laughs as she lists her bodily complaints, and Roger listens to every one of them, nodding and murmuring his consolations.

“So,” I say, sitting up and curling my legs beneath me, beaming at my mate with his little baby – the tiny mirror image of him – in his arms. “Any news from the war front?”

“Some good things,” Sinclair says, sitting down on the bed facing Cora and Roger so that we can all talk – if Roger and Cora ever remember that we’re here- and putting an arm around my shoulders to tug me close. “We’re making good progress with some of our more ambitious plans.”

“Like what?” Cora asks as Sinclair extends a leg across the bed and places Rafe down so he can crawl. Without a word, and perhaps without even realizing that he’s doing it, Roger extends a leg along the other side of the bed, ensuring that Rafe can’t fall off in either direction. I grin, looking between the Sinclair brothers, so pleased to see them become such dads.

“We officially got the vote to fund and start the Alpha Academy,” Roger says, grinning at Cora.

“Oh?” she says, her eyebrows going up as she looks around. “Wow that...incredible...”

Sinclair grins at Cora's false enthusiasm. “What?” he says, leaning forward to her. “You don't like the idea?”

“Well, it may just be that I'm about to become a mom to a little boy,” she says, her hand again stroking over her stomach as she speaks her mind. “But yeah – it gives me a little bit of anxiety to think of an academy that takes young men and trains them to be on the front line of the war.”

“The military takes men as young as eighteen,” Roger says, his voice careful to let her know that he considers her point even as he counters it. “The Alpha Academy starts recruiting at age twenty, and many of the recruits will be as old as twenty-five.”

“Plus,” Sinclair softly points out, “wolves reach their majority at age sixteen.”

My eyes immediately snap to Rafe, who just seems to be growing so fast. Less than fifteen years and he'll be grown in wolf culture. My stomach turns over at the thought.

“I mean, I get it,” Cora says, looking down at her belly with a shrug. “I just... I hate the idea of Rafe and the baby growing up in a world where they're trained to put their lives on the line.”

“It will be their choice,” Sinclair says quietly. “No one would make them go.”

“Yeah,” Cora says, her eyes a little colder now. “But in this family, with all these big tough Alphas swaggering around? And growing up in a nation at war? I doubt they're going to choose to be poets.”

“You never know,” Roger says, tipping his head so that it rests against hers. “They may surprise us.”

“We won't take boys into the Academy to teach them how to sacrifice themselves, Cora,” Sinclair says quietly, his voice heavy with responsibility. “We would teach them to fight, and to survive.”

Cora nods, understanding, but still clearly displeased. “What about girls?” I ask suddenly, frowning a little.

“What?” Sinclair asks, turning to me.

“Girls,” I say, looking between him and Roger. “Can girls go to the Academy too?”

Their hesitation tells me everything I need to know.

“That’s so sexist!” I protest, throwing my hands up in the air.

“Seriously, Ella?” Roger says, leaning forward to look at me with eyes full of doubt. “You’re telling me that if you had a beautiful little girl with rose-gold hair and a sweet little angel face, you’d want to ship her away to a military academy?”

I hesitate, because I know that if I had a little girl...

Well. My instincts would probably be to tie her to my side before I let her do that. But then I look at Rafe and consider – why should it be any different? Why should I have different standards of safety for him, than for a girl?

“Female wolves have different bodily strengths, Ella,” Sinclair says, his voice careful.

“Oh, that’s such crap,” I say, rolling my eyes and turning to him. “I’ve seen my wolf-she’s bigger and more powerful than plenty of men’s wolves out there -”

“No one’s doubting you -”

“But you’re saying girls can’t go to Alpha Academy because our wolves are weaker?”

Sinclair presses his mouth into a line as he looks at me, lowering his brows. “I can concede that point, Ella,” he says softly, his voice hard, “and still insist that the Academy only accept male cadets. At least for now. You’re fighting hundreds of years of male-only wolf military tradition, and while you may be right that we need to ask questions about those traditions, wartime is not the right time for that. No girls.”

I scowl at him, narrowing my eyes, but I back off.

“Okay,” Cora murmurs, leaning forward and clearly preparing to get up. “As pleasant as this incredibly tense dead-end conversation is, I want to go home and lay in my bed.”

“Oh,” I say, my face falling as I turn to look at her. “I’m sorry – you’re right, I shouldn’t pick a fight. Stay! We can have dinner here.”

“No,” she says as Roger stands up. Cora takes his offered hand and accepts his help getting to her feet. “It’s not your fault, ELLS – I’m just...very tired and sore and grumpy and hungry and

“The list goes on,” Roger says, smiling down at her.

“Yes,” she says, looking up at him. “And you’re going to spend all night hearing about

it.”

“Good,” he replies, tilting up her chin and pressing a kiss to her mouth.

I sigh but get up, letting Sinclair catch the baby as he begins to crawl away. My mate playfully scolds our child as I hug my sister goodbye.

“You’ll call me?” I say, looking down at her stomach. “If anything happens?”

“You know I will,” she says, giving me a small smile that falls from her face, replaced by a sigh. “But I think I’ve still got some time left on this one.”

“My phone is on regardless,” I say, pointing to it on my bedside. “You call.”

Cora agrees and she and Roger walk out of the room, him already pressing a firm hand to the small of her back where he knows she’s hurting.

When the door closes behind them, my mate comes and stands next to me, Rafe in his arms.

“Are you mad?” he asks, looking down at me, ready to hear me out if I am.

“No,” I reply, looking up at him and raising a hand to brush my fingers against his cheek. “It’s just all very difficult, isn’t it? And I shouldn’t pick fights about problems we don’t have right now. All of that – Rafe training to be a warrior, potential daughters that’s all years down the line.”

“I worry about it too, you know,” he murmurs, pulling me close.

“You do?” I ask, my eyes going wide. And suddenly I feel a little guilty – because he’s already got so much on his plate to worry about. He should leave worrying about Rafe’s future to me, let alone non-existent potential future children.

“Of course I do,” he says with a smile. “But…” he shifts Rafe to the side so that he can pull me flush against him, his face growing wicked and hungry as he looks down at me. “I can maybe think of a thing or two that we can do to get our minds off of it. Even just for a little bit.”

“Oh, yes, Alpha,” I murmur, smirking and standing on my toes to bring my face closer to his. “Tell me precisely what you’re thinking.”

But my mate? He doesn’t. Instead, he presses his mouth to mine, parting my lips with his, and languidly kisses me, leaving words behind and showing me what he’s thinking instead.

Chapter 473 – Awake

Ella

I'm groggy, a few hours later, when I wake up because I honestly haven't gotten much sleep. But still, I'm instantly aware that I'm awake because something in my body is... different.

As my eyes crack open, I have absolutely no idea what it is, and no real interest in finding out. Because nothing feels wrong or off...just... different...

So, I yawn and snuggle my body back against my naked mate, my spine pressed to his warm stomach. Sinclair gives a deep, sleepy little growl as he tightens his arm around me, holding me close even as he sleeps. I smile at this, happiness sweeping through me as I think about how lovely it is to have a mate that holds me and protects me even when he's mostly unconscious.

And he's so warm, and the bed is so soft, and the sheets are so smooth under my bare skin that I almost...

Almost fall back asleep...

But then? My eyes suddenly fly open.

Because there is...there is something new within me.

As I start to put the pieces together, I am instantly, starkly awake – and so is Rafe, I realize, as I peer through the dark over the side of the bed. My sweet baby is peering at me curiously through the slats of his crib – almost as if he can feel it too

This new...new thing within me, a bond that wasn't there hours ago – but which is there now, just a tiny silver thread of something new

My hands fly to my mouth and my eyes instantly fill with tears because even though I didn't experience this with Rafe – my wolf wasn't awake then, after all, to help me feel it – I suddenly know precisely what it is.

My voice is shaky as I breathe the word, hardly daring to voice it.

"...baby –"

Rafe bumbles something, smiling at me and leaning forward, grabbing the edges of his crib, trying to pull himself up so that he can be closer – almost like he knows it too –

And suddenly I'm laughing – the sound bubbling out of me, rich with joy. "Baby!" I say

again, sitting up in a flash.

“What?” Sinclair murmurs, his voice foggy with sleep, his hand slipping to my waist as I spin to him, pushing him onto his back and throwing a leg over his hips so that I’m straddling him, my hands on his chest-

“Baby!” I shriek, thrilled, almost in pieces because of it, completely unable to contain myself, or think coherently, or make any sense

Sinclair blinks suddenly awake, his hands tightening on my hips as he stares up at me, confused – worried but one look at my thrilled face makes him realize that nothing is bad is going on so what...

“Dominic!” I breathe, laughing and giggling as I lean forward. “Don’t you feel it!?”

He frowns at me confused for a second – “Ella,” he murmurs, “what...”

But then his eyes suddenly go wide and I know, instantly, that he feels it too.

Sinclair snaps to a sitting position as well, shifting me back a little so that I’m sitting in his lap, his arms going tight around me as he stares down into my face. “Oh my god,” he murmurs, still shocked, still feeling it out- making sure that it’s really there – “Ella, it’s...”

“A baby!” I shriek, throwing my hands in the air above our heads.

“A baby,” he murmurs, his eyes suddenly flooding with tears as a mystified smile finds his lips. “Oh my god, Ella, another baby – ”

And I squeal with delight as I wrap my arms around his shoulders, as he tucks his head against my neck and takes a few shaky, happy breaths, passing all of his emotions to me along the bond

Happiness, and sudden anxiety, and joy, and pride, and a thrilled sense of fatherhood-

I put my hand on my mate’s cheek and pull his face up to mine, grinning at him with abandon and wiping away his shocked and happy tears. “A little baby, Dominic,” I murmur, beaming into his face. “A brand new baby!”

“The best surprise I’ve ever gotten, Ella,” he murmurs, staring at me like I’m a marvel as he sniffs his tears away, still laughing a little in shock. He pulls away from me just a little bit, looking down at my stomach almost like he will see a baby bump – though of course there’s nothing yet

I laugh again, pulling Sinclair’s face back up to mine and kissing him, passing all my own

joy down the bond. Because this moment – I've been waiting for it my whole life. A little surprise baby, much desired and already much loved

Sinclair kisses me back with all the love in his heart, holding me close and rocking me back and forth before he lets me go, laughing again.

"Wait," he says, his voice eager and thrilled, "let's check -"

"What?" I breathe, suddenly curious and a little anxious – is the baby all right? – is-

"Here," he says, putting a steady hand on my cheek. "Close your eyes," he murmurs, his voice excited, if soft. I do as he says, loosing a deep breath and draping my arms lightly around his neck before I close my eyes. I feel Sinclair connect to me down our bond, and then together we turn to the little silver bond that runs between both of us, just as Rafe's bond does so slim, so tenuous and new

I feel Sinclair move forward to it, almost as if he puts a mental finger out and strokes it, just gently –

And in a glowing rush, I suddenly know...so, so much about her.

Her bond feels a great deal like her brother's, but also has a line of sweetness and determination within it not that that Rafe lacks those traits, but there's just more

When I open my eyes they're filled with tears and my lower lip is trembling.

"Did you know all this?" I ask quietly, completely overwhelmed. "When Rafe was still growing? When he was this little?"

Slowly, Sinclair nods.

"Why didn't you tell me!?" I ask, smacking him on the shoulder and laughing.

"I didn't want you to be jealous," he murmurs, "which you definitely would have been."

I laugh with him, conceding the point as tears slip down my cheeks, as I look down at my flat belly and press a hand over it where she exists, where she'll grow. "She's already... like the start of a whole little person in there..."

"We're born who we are," Sinclair murmurs, "so much of our personality already intact. It makes sense that it'd be there in the beginning."

"Yeah," I say, rubbing my belly absently, and then I burst into a grin again and sniff my tears back as I lift my eyes again to my mate's. "Plus," I say, joy sweeping through me

again, "it's a little girl!" I squeal the last word, thrilled, making Sinclair laugh his booming laugh and pull me tight against him.

"I know," he whispers, falling back onto the mattress and taking me with him, turning me in his arms so that we lay side-by-side, our faces close together. "You two are going to run me ragged."

"That's the plan," I say, giggling with my joy, running a finger down his beautiful cheek. "Now the numbers are even. But me and Babygirl are going to get Rafe on our side for the important votes – don't worry –"

"Oh?" Sinclair asks, his voice dry, an eyebrow raised. "Is this family suddenly a democracy?"

"Oh," I say, pouting and teasing him, "did the poor King think that he was in charge? Get it out of your head, Dominic," I say, laughing and shoving his shoulder with my fingertips. "Me and Babygirl are in charge now."

"Is that what we're calling her?"

Sinclair asks, his voice soft as his eyes

shine, taking in every aspect of my face. "Babygirl Sinclair?" I smile as I gaze back at him, as I feel him connecting with the new baby again, already passing love down the tiny sliver of a bond.

I wrinkle my nose at him. "Just for now," I whisper. "Although Princess Babygirl is very cute."

"A Princess," he says, his eyebrows suddenly going up as if he considers it for the first time. "Wow, a Princess..."

"Our Princess," I whisper, grinning at him and leaning in for a kiss –

But before I get very far, my phone on my bedstand begins to ring.

And I sit straight up

Because only one call would come through at this time of night.

Cora.

Chapter 474 – Sharing the News

“Cora?” I gasp the minute I get the phone to my ear, still scrambling out of bed and tangled in the sheets.

“Hey, Ells,” she says, her voice somehow both tight and bored at once. “Sorry to wake you up – ”

“You didn’t wake me – ” I say quickly, reaching for Rafe in his crib and scooping him up in my arms. Behind me, I hear Sinclair climbing out of bed too, coming to my side.

“I didn’t?” Cora asks. “Why actually.” Her voice goes stony. “Don’t tell me. Knowing you and Dominic, I probably don’t want to know.”

A little laugh bursts from me as I shake my head, trying to get back on track with this conversation. “Cora,” I say, looking down at Rafe’s bright, wide -awake face, “what’s up? Why are you calling? Is the baby -”

“Yeah,” she says on a sigh. “Roger insisted I call. Baby’s on its way!”

“Oh my god!” I shriek, spinning to Sinclair and beaming at him for the second time this morning. “It’s time for the baby! We’ll come right away -”

“No, take your time,” she says on a sigh and I frown at her even though she can’t see me.

“Cora, what is going on? Why are you calling in the middle of the night for us to come but then also telling us not to hurry?”

“Because my stupid mate made me call you,” Cora says, her voice annoyed. She lowers her voice to a whisper. “He’s completely freaking out, Ells, even though everything is progressing totally normally -”

“Awww,” I say, passing Rafe to Sinclair’s waiting hands and smiling up at him. “Go easy on him, Cora! He’s a first-time dad!”

“And a last time dad,” she mutters, making me laugh again, “if he’s this annoying every time I go into labor.”

“Okay, well, should we come?” I ask, looking up into Sinclair’s face, a silent question in my eyes. Can we go? Is there any pressing national business that means we need to stay back? Sinclair nods eagerly to me, letting me know we can.

“Yeah,” she says on another sigh. “Do you mind? Honestly, Ella, I don’t think my body is anywhere close to ready to push but Roger just wants everything in place.”

“Okay,” I say cheerfully, nodding up to Sinclair who gives me a wink and starts to walk away to the closet to get himself and Rafe dressed. “Honestly, Cora, if he’s freaking out this much how did you ever talk him into a home birth?”

“Well now he’s trying to talk me out of it – anyway,” she sighs, “will you just come?”

I grin as I hear Roger yelling something in the background, his voice thick with anxiety though I can’t hear what he’s saying. My heart swells a little for my secretly-sweet brother-in-law, who I know has his whole heart wrapped up in what’s happening today.

“Yup,” I say, “we’ll be there as soon as we can. And we’ll let Henry know too.”

“Okayyy,” Cora says on a sigh. “See you in a bit!”

“Excited!” I call through the phone before hanging up and tossing it onto the bed. Then I practically skip into the closet in my excitement, going immediately to Sinclair’s side and wrapping my arms around his waist, grinning up at him.

“Is Cora all right?” he asks, cupping my face in his palm.

“I think so,” I say, nodding up at him. “Apparently she’s still got time – Roger’s just freaking out.”

“Of course he is,” Sinclair says with a laugh. “Roger’s great under pressure except when it comes to things that are completely out of his control. It’s going to drive him crazy to have to watch Cora have to go through a great deal of labor and pain and not be able to do anything about it.”

“That’s so weird, but also so sweet,” I say, nodding and pressing a quick kiss to his chest before flitting off to my side of the closet and selecting some clothes that I hastily pull on. When I’m ready, I turn to take the half-dressed baby from my half-dressed mate and finish getting Rafe all wrapped up in cozy layers.

“Are you ready to meet your little cousin, Rafe?” I coo to him, plucking a little squeeze pouch of baby food off its place on the shelf and sitting down with him in our little arm chair so he can have something to eat while Sinclair finishes getting ready. “And then, in a couple of months, your little baby sister?”

Rafe grins at me and I laugh, because the way he looks at me when I talk – god, it’s as if he’s already starting to understand.

I spend a few quiet moments with my son, thinking about how he’s going to react when there’s a little baby around –

And quite suddenly my eyes fill with tears when I realize that in my mind I've already stopped thinking about Rafe as The Baby

That the title has already passed to my little girl

"What is it?" Sinclair asks, and I whip my head up to see that I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't even notice when he walked over to me.

"Rafe's not the baby anymore," I say, sniffing even as I laugh at my own ridiculousness. "I didn't even think about that "

"Of course he is," Sinclair says, smiling sympathetically at me and taking Rafe from my arms. "He's always the baby."

"He's already so big!" I insist, gesturing towards him. "He was trying to stand up in his crib today! And now that there's a Sinclair cousin coming today – and another baby on the way "the tears start to spill down my cheeks and I press my hands to my poor mother's heart. "Oh, he won't be the baby anymore! He's the eldest!"

Sinclair laughs at me a little, shaking his head. "He's always our baby, Ella. You know that. He can be both."

I stand quickly, reaching for my baby boy and clutching him protectively to my chest when my mate hands him back to me. I shake my head as I look up at Sinclair. "It's just all going so fast..."

"Life has a habit of doing that," Sinclair murmurs, stepping close and wiping my tears away with his thumb. " But if it didn't, you won't get to live it."

I nod, sighing and looking down at Rafe, who looks up at me with curious and interested green eyes. I can't help but smile at him and press a quick kiss to his head. Then I look back up at his father. "Let's not tell anyone about the new baby yet, all right?" I say quietly, sniffing back the last of my sentimental tears. "Let Cora have her day."

"It's a good idea," Sinclair says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and pressing a kiss to my forehead. " Though Roger will probably be able to smell it on you."

"Do I already smell different?" I ask, my eyes going wide. I am, at best, a few days pregnant – honestly, even if that.

Sinclair sniffs the air around me lightly, experimental. "A little," he says with a shrug. "It's subtle, and Roger will be distracted, but yes, Ella, any wolf who gets close enough to you is going to be able to tell that you're carrying my pup."

"Weird," I say, looking down at myself and sniffing. "Why can't I smell it?"

"I don't know," he says, his mind already moving towards other things as he starts to look towards the closet door. "Can you usually smell yourself?"

"I don't know..." I say, honestly thinking about it. Seriously, I've known I'm a wolf for a while now, but it's still weird. "Can Rafe smell the baby on me?"

Sinclair laughs, tugging me along with him as he starts out of the closet and we cross to the door of our room. "I don't know, ask him."

So I do, babbling a little to my sweet baby as we walk down the hall. But of course he doesn't respond with his own words, though he sends a great deal of happiness down our bond and reaches out his hands to me, trying to touch my face and making me laugh.

I'm quite full with happiness as Sinclair and I climb into one of the cars in the garage downstairs, surprising the poor sleepy attendants who rush to get it ready for us. But even with the little delay, we're on the road in a few minutes, heading to Cora's house to help her, and calm her mate, and greet the new little Sinclair baby.

Chapter 475 – Chaos at Home

“Oh geeze,” I say when we pull up to Cora and Roger’s house in the pre- dawn morning and see that every light is on. “You ready for this?”

“Sure!” Sinclair says, grinning at me as he puts the car in park at the end of the driveway. “It will be a nice role reversal – this time Roger can be the one worried sick and I can be in the background cracking jokes.”

“Aww, sweetheart,” I say, grinning at my mate and putting a soft hand on his cheek. “It’s cute that you think you’re funny enough to crack jokes.”

Sinclair’s brows knit together as he frowns at me. “What are you talking about? I’m very funny.”

“Okay, baby,” I murmur, patting his shoulder as I turn to climb out of the car.

“I am!” he insists as he gets out of the driver’s seat and starts around the car.

“Dominic,” I sigh, hiding my teasing grin as I lean into the car and unbuckle Rafe, pulling him into my arms. “You have so many blessings. Why do you need to be funny too?”

“Because I am funny!” Sinclair says, crossing his arms and glaring at me.

“Okay!” I say cheerfully, not contracting him but moving quickly towards the front door of the house without confirming either.

“Ella!” he scoffs, striding after me.

“What!?” I laugh, knocking on the door for once instead of just striding in because I want to give Cora and Roger their privacy if they’re not ready for us. We did get here really fast, after all the roads were empty this early.

“I make you laugh all the time,” Sinclair says, still frowning down at me.

“Yes, sweetheart,” I say, grinning with mischief as I gaze up at him, “but I’m laughing at you, not your jokes.”

He growls at me, starting to get a little miffed, and I burst into laughter. Sinclair opens his mouth to protest more but both of our attention snaps forward when the door flies open, revealing a harried Roger staring at us with the fingers of one hand already tangled in his own hair.

“Come in,” he says, his voice frantic and full of dread. “I need you to talk sense into her –
”

"No, he doesn't!" Cora calls, and, grinning, I peer beyond Roger to see her starting up the steps, leaning hard against the banister. "Everything is fine, please come in!"

Roger sighs a deep, tortured breath and I pat him on his shoulder as I hurry past him and up the stairs to Cora, taking the plate of toast she's carrying out of her hand, Rafe perched on my hip. Cora smiles her thanks at me and presses her hand to the small of her back as she concentrates on getting up the stairs.

"Why don't you just use the stair lift chair?" I ask, gesturing towards it.

"Because I'm perfectly capable of getting up the stairs, Ella," Cora growls as she continues to lift herself up one step at a time, glaring at me.

"Well duh," I say, rolling my eyes at her. "It's just fun."

This makes her laugh a little and she shakes her head at me. "Okay, good," she says. "Someone sane is here. Can you please have Dominic just tie the other one up downstairs until this is all finished?"

"Can you please talk some sense into her, Ella?" Roger calls from the bottom of the steps, and I turn to see him standing at the bottom, looking desperately up at me.

"About what?" I ask, looking between them, baffled. Because honestly Cora looks fine to me just very pregnant and in the early stages of labor. And she would know if anything were actually wrong – she's an OBGYN.

"We need to go to the hospital!" Roger insists as Sinclair closes the front door and stands at his brother's side at the bottom of the stairs, radiating support but unable to keep a little smile from his mouth, clearly enjoying seeing his big brother all freaked out. "This idea of a home birth was a terrible idea – what were we thinking -"

"We decided on a home birth months ago, Roger!" Cora calls over her shoulder, sighing as she does. I grin at her as we get to the top of the steps because I can tell that this is an argument they've been having all night, and one that she thinks is getting old. "We're not changing plans now!"

"We were idiots months ago," Roger growls, starting to follow us up the stairs. Sinclair comes with him as Cora and I walk to the bedroom.

"I think a home birth is a good idea," I say, following Cora into her bedroom and over to the bed, where I place her toast on the side table before lifting Rafe more securely into my arms. Cora climbs into bed and then puts her hands out for Rafe, who I lower for a kiss, though I don't pass him to her. She's already got one baby to worry about.

"It is a good idea," she says with a sigh after she gives Rafe a sweet kiss and musses his hair. "I'm perfectly healthy – there's no reason to not do it at home, and I've got doctors coming to stand by just in case! Ridiculous," she mutters, pulling the blankets up over her knees.

"You'll be safer in a hospital," Roger says, crossing his arms as he comes into the room.

"No, I won't," she sighs, flicking him a little glare as she settles the blankets just how she wants them. "My sister, the magical healer, is here. It'll be fine I couldn't be any safer."

"I had a home birth, Roger," I say, turning to him and gesturing to Rafe, who gives a happy little squeak. "Or, well, a palace birth, even if it wasn't our home yet. And everything turned out fine!"

Roger's face goes slack as he stares at me. "You almost died, Ella!"

"Oh," I say, turning my head to the side as I remember it. "Oh yeah!" I laugh a little, giving a shrug. "

Honestly, I always forget that part..."

Roger just groans, turning away and covering his face with his hands. "He's watched too much Little House on the Prairie," Cora murmurs, rolling her eyes at me. "He thinks a home birth is all boiling water and screaming and blood everywhere – "

Roger groans again, louder this time, and I see Sinclair clench his jaw to keep from laughing as he pats his brother's back.

"It's going to be fine," I say, smiling at Roger's turned back, but I turn back to Cora when I hear her moan a little. "Contraction?" I ask.

"Yup," Cora answers tightly, taking a deep breath. "About five minutes apart."

"Did your water break?"

She nods, but doesn't answer, clearly gritting her teeth through the pain. I murmur to her consolingly and reach for her hand, Rafe still wrapped cozy in my other arm.

"Oh my god," I hear Roger murmur, coming quickly to my side. "Is she...is she all right?"

"I'm right here!" Cora growls, lifting her head to glare at him.

"I'm just asking!"

“You can ask me!”

“Okay!” he says, a little frantic. “Are you all right!?”

Cora squeezes my hand and glares at Roger for a long half minute. Then she gives a little gasp as the pain of the contraction starts to fade. She pants a little and turns her eyes to Sinclair. ”

Please, Dominic,” she says, shaking her head at him. “Can you please take him downstairs and get him drunk or something? I can’t take this frantic energy.”

“I’ll be calm!” Roger insists, whipping his head to look around at us like we’re going to lock him away or something.

“Come on, brother,” Sinclair says, crossing the room to take Rafe from me and then wrapping his arm around Roger’s shoulders, turning him out of the room. “Seriously, maybe you do need a drink -”

“I need six drinks,” Roger sighs, melancholy as he allows himself to be lead away.

Cora sighs and leans back against the pillows as we hear their footsteps and voices travel downstairs. I sit next to her on the bed, smiling at her.

“He’s just going crazy because he loves you,” I say quietly.

“I know,” she sighs, looking at the empty door that her mate walked through a moment ago. “And I love him to. He’s just driving me nuts, and he’s not allowing me to freak out at all.” She pauses for a moment, her hands going to her swollen belly before she looks up at me. “He’s supposed to be the calm one, I’m supposed to be the one freaking out about pushing a gigantic Sinclair baby through a very small opening in a few hours!”

“Aww, sis,” I say, leaning forward and wrapping her in a hug as I secretly pass Cora’s words down the bond to Sinclair, advising that he tell Roger that Cora needs him to be calm and collected so that she doesn’t have to play that role today.

My mate sends me back a pulse of confirmation, letting me know that he’s on it.

“How long do you think you’ve got?” I ask, pulling away from Cora and looking her over, seeing the tension and fear on her face as well as her characteristic determination. I smile when I see that – my sweet, tough sister, ready to take this on like she does everything in her life.

“Hard to tell,” she says with a sigh, running her hand over her belly. “A few hours, at

least. But I'm glad you're here, Ella."

"No place I'd rather be," I say, smiling at her and crawling across the bed until I'm sitting in Roger's spot, snuggled up against her shoulder. She sighs and grabs the remote from the table next to her. "We've got about four minutes until the next bout of agonizing pain. Want to watch tv?"

"Sure," I say, nodding as Cora flicks it on and puts on some deliciously mindless reality show. And together, we settle in to wait for the baby to be born.

Chapter 476 – Labor

Cora

I narrow my eyes at Roger when he comes upstairs about forty-five minutes later. “Are you going to behave better now?” I ask, my voice tense.

“Yup,” he says, leaning in the doorway with a lazy smile.

I start to laugh as I look over his too – loose stature. “Is it because you’re all drunk?” My eyes shift to Sinclair as he appears in the doorway behind his brother. “Seriously, did you get him all drunk?”

Sinclair, Rafe sitting up in his arms, just gives a little shrug, his mouth pulled up at the corner in a secret smile.

“I am only,” Roger says, smiling as he steps into the room and holding up a hand with his thumb and pointer finger pressed very close together, “a very tiny bit drunk. Just something to steady the nerves.”

Ella laughs next to me before she scoots off the bed.

“All right, then,” she says, gesturing to me as she moves around the bed and reaches to take Rafe from Sinclair. “Take your spot, Roger. And stop freaking her out, okay?”

“I promise,” Roger mumbles, giving Ella a sloppy little salute before climbing onto the bed and taking her place.

“We’ll be downstairs,” Ella says when I turn my eyes to her. “You just call, and we’ll be right up. Okay?”

I nod to her, smiling a little, grateful that she’s here. Beyond having the power to heal me instantly should anything go wrong, it’s just...really nice to have my sister close by.

Roger sighs as he pulls himself into the spot close on my right and tucks his legs in under the blankets. Then he turns to me, his face serious. “I’m sorry, Cora,” he says quietly.

“Thank you,” I say, my anger fading as I see that he means it. I lift a hand to his cheek, wanting to touch him, wanting him close.

“I just love you so much

“I get it,” I say, nodding.

He nods too, capturing my hand and pressing a kiss to it. "But I didn't listen to you. And Sinclair made me sit down and listen – which he shouldn't have to do, so I'm sorry about that. But he explained that you need to be the one freaking out today. So, I have to just... be steady. Is that right?"

"It's closer," I say quietly, studying him. "I mean, Roger, it's not that you can't feel afraid too – I get that it's a big day-"

He nods, agreeing with me. "But I was taking all the air out of the room. I'm sorry, Cora – you're right, we had a plan, we should just trust it. Everything's going to be fine, yeah?"

"Yeah," I say, a little smile coming to my lips now as he slips an arm around my back, tugging me close.

"How far apart are the contractions?" he asks, looking down at my belly and stroking it softly with his hands.

"Still five minutes," I answer, my voice quiet. "Or, maybe a little faster now? Four and a half?"

"Cool, cool," he says, pretending a calmness that I know he doesn't feel. "That is all very cool..."

Suddenly, I start to laugh.

"What?" Roger asks, turning to grin at me.

"You're just very sweet, Roger Sinclair," I murmur, taking his cheeks in my hands and leaning forward to press a kiss to his mouth. "Trying to do everything right."

"Well, I have to try, don't I," he murmurs against my lips, kissing me back. "I'm going to be a dad in a few hours."

"To a real cutie," I say, leaning back and smiling down at my belly. And I bite my lip, feeling significantly calmer now, starting to get...well, maybe a little excited, alongside being terrified. "Do you think he'll have any hair?"

"Nah, completely bald," Roger murmurs, a little thoughtlessly as he tucks his head close to mine and takes a deep breath of my scent, "like an old man." I laugh again, harder this time.

"And what color do you think his eyes will be?" I ask.

"Purple," he replies, making me click my tongue and pull away to glare at him.

“How would that even be possible!?”

He grins at me. “These are goddess grandchildren,” he says, grinning at me. “Anything is possible. The baby could have wings.”

“That,” I say, rolling my eyes, “would have shown up on an ultrasound.”

“But purple eyes,” he says, holding up a finger, “would not.”

“Ridiculous,” I sigh, but I’m smiling as I snuggle close to him. Or at least I smile for a second, before the next contraction starts again. “Oh boy,” I say, sitting up, a hand moving low on my stomach. “Here we go.”

Roger goes rigid next to me but does his best to stay quiet, his eyes on me throughout the whole contraction. He keeps his arms around me too until the pain passes.

“All right?” he says quietly when it all fades.

“Yeah,” I say, turning my eyes to his now. And then I smile a little, returning my hand to his cheek. “I hope the baby’s eyes are just like yours,” I murmur.

“Nah,” he says, smirking at me. “Big brown ones, like his mom. That would be best.”

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” I reply, dropping my hand from his cheek and wrapping my fingers in his instead.

“Maybe we can get the baby to hurry up,” Roger murmurs, turning his attention to the bond that runs between us and the baby.

I laugh, even as I focus on the bond as well. “Nah, don’t rush him,” I sigh. “He’ll come on his own time.”

“Poor kid,” Roger says, sighing as he inspects the bond and passes love and comfort and reassurance to the baby, as well as to me. “He’s all uncomfortable, cooped up in there.”

“Well, tell him we’ve got a nice big crib for him out here,” I say, laughing a bit. “Whenever he’s ready to make his appearance.”

“Come on, kid,” Roger murmurs. “Any time you want, we’re ready.”

And honestly, for the first time? I agree. I’m finally ready – completely ready to bring our baby into the world with a nice, calm, maybe slightly tipsy Roger at my side.

Unfortunately, the baby really does take his time. The whole day passes and dusk darkens our windows before my contractions really start to heat up. By then, the house is busy with all the people we've asked to come to the house for the birth our family, but also several medical professionals to really ensure that everything goes smoothly.

Actually, just one person is missing by the time I'm almost ready to push. But I smile when I see him standing, quite suddenly, at my bedroom door.

"Hey, Cora," Hank says, smiling at me with genuine happiness and pride.

"Hank!" Ella says as she turns at my side, her face lighting with a grin.

"Are you kidding me!?" Roger bursts out, kneeling next to me on the bed and looking between Hank and I with an appalled expression.

"Roger!" I gasp, momentarily distracted from the pain racing through me as two nurses bustle around the room, getting everything ready. "You will apologize to Hank!"

"Why is he here?!" Roger shouts, his frantic anxiety starting to come out again now that his buzz has worn off and we're a little closer to the birth itself.

"Hank is the most respected doctor in the city!" I hiss in response, "and our friend!"

"And your ex!"

"And!" I point a finger in his face, glaring now even as my breath comes short with the next contraction, "he saved Ella's life like four times! And Rafe's! So! He's here!"

Roger growls at me but then sits back on the rubberized sheets that we put on the bed about an hour ago, giving in and glaring around the room.

"Nice to see you too, Rog," Hank says, leaning against the doorframe now and grinning around at all of us. "Man, I didn't think I would, but I missed the Sinclair drama – "

Ella laughs and leaves my side temporarily to go give Hank a hug as I pant through my contractions.

"How far apart are your contractions, Cora?" Hank asks, staying at the door even as Ella comes to my side.

I groan through the pain, glancing at Ella and nodding to her, asking her to speak for me as I cling to Roger's hand.

“She’s less than two minutes apart,” Ella says, a little too cheerfully considering the amount of pain that I’m in.

“Well, it sounds like you’re ready, but I’m not an obstetrician,” Hank says with a shrug, nodding around to us. “I’m just here in case of an emergency.

Is there somewhere I can...”

“Downstairs,” Ella says, sending him a quick smile and a wave over her shoulder. “Go have cigar and brandy with the men.”

Hank wishes me luck as he goes but I barely hear anything as I tip my head back onto the pillow, panting as the contraction fades.

“All right, Mrs. Sinclair,” the head nurse says from Roger’s other side. “It’s time to push. Are you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I reply, glancing both at Ella and Roger, who I’ve asked to stay. Ella gives me an excited smile and Roger gives me a tense, heartfelt nod.

And then I give an exhale and steady myself as I begin to push.

Chapter 477 – New Baby

Cora

“You’ve got this, Cora!” Ella cheers at my side while I squeeze Roger’s hand, panting and shouting as I give what the nurse has told me is one last, final push.

I put everything I have into this final moment, squeezing my eyes shut and pushing as hard as I can, wanting this done – wanting to feel my little baby in my arms

And suddenly the pressure lessens, and my eyes fly open as I gasp And there’s a little baby’s cry ringing out through the room.

“Here!” I gasp, leaning forward fervently, some motherly demand in me needing my little baby now even as I see him in the nurse’s hands. “Give him to me!”

The nurse hesitates, looking towards her colleagues. I moan a little, still reaching, wanting him now

“Do it,” Ella snaps suddenly up from my side. She stands and moves towards the nurse, putting a hand on her shoulder and gesturing towards me. “He needs his mother – ”

Roger is completely still at my side, his eyes focused totally on the baby, who starts to cry his little heart out.

“Please,” I beg, reaching for him.

“All right,” the nurse says, nodding and bringing him forward. “We’ll clean him up in a minute – ”

And she takes two steps forward, and leans down, and places my little baby in my arms

And I burst immediately into tears.

Because the weight of him against my arm-his little head curled against my elbow-my heart just breaks to feel him close to me, so strange and new and yet so completely right.

I stare down at my little baby, tears dripping down my face as I take in every ounce of him, every tiny finger and toe, his wide and crying mouth with its perfect tiny lips –

Roger is pressed tight to my side, his arms wrapped around me, staring down at our perfect son.

“I can’t believe he’s here,” I whisper in complete awe.

"I can't believe he's so mad," Roger replies, his voice reverent.

I burst into laughter, glancing at my mate and shaking my head at him, sniffing back my tears, grateful that his strange sense of humor has at least stopped my crying. "You know, Roger," I say quietly, "most new parents say something nice about their kid when they meet him for the first time, like how beautiful he is, or how much they love him."

"Well, he's making a lot of noise, Cora," Roger murmurs, still staring at the baby with an expression somewhere between shock and awe. "I doubt he'd even hear me wasted compliment." it'd be a

"Ignore him, gorgeous boy," I murmur to the baby, cuddling him close and pressing a kiss to his forehead. "Welcome to the world. You are very, very loved."

"See?" Roger sighs. "I couldn't have come up with something that good. He needed you for that."

"Well, he's got me," I sigh. "My whole heart, forever, little baby."

And though I'm exhausted, and my whole body is aching, I just feel such rich, complete happiness in this moment.

We sit for a few more minutes where it feels like Roger and the baby and I are the only three people in the world. I almost jump in surprise when I feel Ella's hand on my shoulder.

Her own face is streaked with tears of joy when I look up at her. "What do you think, Cora?" she asks quietly. "Will you let the nurses clean him up and wrap in him in a blanket? And I'll check you out, see if I can heal you up?"

"Oh," I say, suddenly remembering that – yeah, the baby needs to be checked. And I laugh as the nurse comes close, reaching for him. "I'm sorry," I say, shaking my head. "I didn't mean to yell at you earlier -"

"It's okay, you didn't," the nurse says, grinning at me as she takes the baby from my arms. "You're just an excited new mom and the birth went beautifully, no complications, so there's no harm in wanting to hold him first."

My eyes follow the nurse as she carries the baby across the room to be weighed and checked out by the doctor. But the nurse is right – everything went well, and the baby looked fine to me. I don't anticipate any problems.

"You lucky thing," Ella murmurs, sitting down next to me and holding her hands out, palm

up. "I basically bled out after my traumatic pregnancy, and you get away scot-free?"

"Don't be jealous, Ells," I sigh, placing my hands on top of hers and laughing a little. "I'm sure your next one will be perfectly smooth."

She flinches a little, looking up at me with wide eyes, and I turn my head to the side, not understanding her reaction. But then she just grins and shakes her head, dismissing it. "I'm sure it will," she says with a happy sigh. "Now, does anything hurt?"

"Aren't I the one who usually asks that?" I murmur in reply, leaning my head on Roger's shoulder, starting to feel my exhaustion now more than I did before.

Ella laughs and closes her eyes, starting to call upon her gift. I feel it when it starts to sweep through me, and I sit up a little with curiosity. This isn't the first time Ella has healed me, of course, but this is the most conscious I've been for it and I can really feel it this time – the way the gift runs through me, seeking out the parts of me that hurt and sweeping through them piece by piece until...

Well, until I feel completely fine.

"There," Ella says, taking her hands away and opening her eyes. "All good?"

"Yeah," I say, laughing a little. "Honestly, Ella, it's still crazy that you can do that."

"Thank mom, not me," she murmurs, standing up when the nurse brings the baby back. He's not crying anymore, even though he fusses a little unhappily in his swaddled blanket. I see Ella bite her lip and tuck her hands behind her back, and I laugh when I realize that she's actively stopping herself from grabbing the baby because she wants to hold him so badly –

"Take him, Ella!" I say, encouraging my sister, who I know will love this child his whole life almost as much as I will. "You can hold him."

"No," she says, nodding towards Roger. "His dad should have that honor first."

"Yeah, Cora," Roger grumbles beside me. "It's my kid too."

"Oh, shut up," I sigh, taking the baby back from the nurse and turning a little so I can see Roger better. "You're scared to hold the baby and you know it."

"Well," Roger says, hesitating as he takes his arms from around me and starts to reach for the baby, stopping at the last minute. "He's very small..."

"I'll go get Dominic," Ella whispers, slipping out of the room. "Give you two a minute

alone.”

The birthing nurses and obstetrician likewise skirt out, giving us a moment, though I'm well aware that they have work to do over the next couple hours now that the baby is born.

“Are you ready?” I ask, preparing to pass the baby to Roger, who really does look at the infant with wide eyes.

“I'm used to them when they're bigger,” he murmurs. “Rafe I can handle...”

“Come on, new daddy,” I laugh. “You can do it.” And then I slip our newborn son into Roger's arms

And I swear, I see his heart completely melt.

“Hey, little guy,” Roger murmurs, his lips trembling a little as he looks the baby over from head to toe. The baby presses his eyes shut and gives a frowning little mew. “Oh, it's all right,” Roger sighs. “It's nice here, I promise. You'll cheer up really soon.”

The baby yawns in reply, and both of our faces break into ridiculous smiles.

Chapter 478 – Meeting the Family

Cora

“He’s amazing,” Roger says, beaming as he raises his head look at me in wonder. “I didn’t – damn it, Cora, I didn’t know I could love someone this much -”

“What about me!?”

“Someone besides you,” Roger says, rolling his eyes. “You’re my mate, Cora, obviously that’s different.”

“Damn well better be,” I murmur, bending over the baby and stroking the skin of his perfect, tiny face with the tip of my finger. Roger leans close, giving me a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice so quiet I barely hear him. “You’re amazing Cora. I’m so grateful for you, and for him, and everything you did to bring him into this world.”

I smile as I raise my eyes to my mate’s and then I kiss him for real, passing all of those sentiments back down the bond. Because this little baby – he really is both of ours, equal parts of both of us, the perfect embodiment of everything we mean to each other.

And quite suddenly, he’s our entire world.

“So, what do you think,” I say a moment later when I break the kiss, looking back down at the baby. “Does the name still fit?”

“Yeah, I think the name still fits,” Roger says, his lips turning up in a smile as he looks the baby over. “I think it’s perfect.”

“All right,” I say, beaming down at our kid. “Then welcome, to the world, little J-”

But then, the door opens, and I see Ella peeking in.

“I gave you a full five minutes,” she squeaks. “But I don’t think I can bear it any longer-”

I laugh, reaching out a hand towards her. “Come in!”

When the door opens, I see Sinclair and Henry peering curiously behind her, both eager to set their eyes on the baby. Only Rafe isn’t excited, but he has an excuse because he’s curled sleeping in Sinclair’s arms. My smile widens as the my family starts to troop in.

“Wow,” Sinclair murmurs, bending over to peer at the little baby in his brother’s arms.

“He’s beautiful, Cora. Congratulations.”

“Roger!” I say, laughing and giving him a little shove. “Let them hold the baby!”

“I would,” Roger says, looking over at his family with a big smile. “But I’m afraid to move. I don’t want to drop him.”

I laugh, reaching to take the baby from Roger and then turning to place him in Ella’s waiting arms, which are practically vibrating with their eagerness to hold her new nephew.

“Oh!” Ella squeaks, one hand going to her mouth as she looks down at our perfect little baby boy. “Oh, he’s so perfect! And so little! And so cute – oh I didn’t think he’d be cute like this ”

“Excuse me,” Roger says, sitting back against the pillows and crossing his arms over his chest. “You didn’t think my baby would be cute!?”

Ella laughs, shaking her head and not bothering to look at my mate. “No, not like that, Roger, don’t be ridiculous – I just – I expected him to be dark, like Rafe – like you and Dominic -” she grins, studying her nephew. “But his hair is lighter,” she murmurs, running her fingertips over his soft fuzz of hair, “like Cora’s. It’s beautiful.”

I beam as I watch my sister fall in love with her nephew, as I watch Sinclair look over her shoulder at him with pride.

“What did you -” Ella says, lifting her head in sudden surprise and looking between Roger and I. “What did you call him? Do we finally get to know?”

“Well,” I say, sitting up straight now, feeling quite formal all of a sudden. ” Ella, Dominic, Henry – Roger and I are very pleased to introduce you to your nephew and grandson... Jesse. Jesse Sinclair.”

Ella gives another sudden squeak as her hand again goes to her mouth. “Oh my god,” she murmurs, pressing her eyes shut against her sudden tears, ” it’s so perfect – oh, I can’t handle it, Dominic, you have to take him -”

Sinclair moves fast now, passing the sleeping Rafe to a laughing Henry and then reaching for Jesse, taking my tiny baby into the crook of his gigantic arm and beaming down at the newest member of the Sinclair tribe as Ella wipes at her tears with the back of her hand.

“What a little tiger,” Sinclair murmurs, grinning at Jesse and running a broad palm over the baby’s head.

“May I?” Henry asks, eager to meet his grandson. And Sinclair smiles, waiting patiently as Ella darts over to lift Rafe out of Henry’s arms so that Jesse can take the place of honor.

“Well well, little grandson,” Henry says, smiling softly at the little baby who fusses in his arms once Sinclair passes him over. “Don’t worry, I’ll send you back to your mother soon I know she’s the one you want. I just want to get a good look at you. Do you know who I am? Grandpa?” Henry smiles and lowers his face to kiss the baby’s head. “I’ve been waiting a long time to meet you, little Jesse,” he murmurs. “We’re all very glad you’re here.”

The next few minutes pass in a haze of happiness with everyone marveling at the newest, freshest member of our family, each of us wondering a little absently about his future, about how much we’re going to love him. Somehow, inevitably, he ends up back in my arms and though I’m glad his family all got a chance to say hello, I admit that there’s a great deal of relief to have him back with me.

“Right here, where you belong, little baby,” I murmur, staring down into my son’s face as he starts to drift off to sleep, frowning a little and making me laugh. “Here with your family that loves you.”

The doctors and nurses come in a little after that and the room is busy, though I admit I don’t catch much of it, too distracted by the sight of my sleeping baby and my own exhaustion. Roger gets up from the bed to go and fill out the birth certificate paperwork and do some other things – I don’t know what – while I stay in the bed, just spending some quiet time with the baby. Eventually, though, I feel a familiar hand on my shoulder.

“Congratulations, Cora,” Hank says when I look up, and my face bursts into a grin. “He’s really beautiful.”

“Thanks, Hank,” I say, smiling at him and covering his hand with mine. But then I blink, quite suddenly, to see a familiar face behind him. “Oh, Sarah!” I say, smiling at her too. “Did you come to see the baby?”

“Actually,” she says, biting her lip – and then, to my surprise, wrapping her arm around Hank’s. “I came with him. He said it would be all right – is it all right?”

“Of course, it’s all right,” I say, laughing a little and looking between them. “I just – I didn’t know – ”

“Wait, what!?” Ella says, gasping and coming to my side. “What’s all this!?”

Hank, I grin to see, blushes and waves his hand, dismissing it. “It’s not important right

now we don't want to take away from the baby – ”

“Hank!” Ella says, laughing and smacking him on the shoulder, “why didn't you tell us!? Sarah!” she exclaims, stepping forward to wrap her arms around our friend. “I'm so happy for you two!”

“Thanks,” Sarah says, laughing and blushing as well. “But really – I don't want to distract _.”

Ella hugs her again as Hank turns back to me, smiling his quiet smile and slipping his hands into his pockets.

“I'm glad I was here,” Hank says, though equally glad my presence was unnecessary. Your doctor said that everything went beautifully.”

“It did,” I say, grinning at him. ” Thank you for coming, Hank,” I say, meaning it genuinely.

“Anything for you, Cora,” he replies, giving me a quiet smile. “And for this family. I'll miss you all when I'm gone.”

“What?” I ask, my eyes going suddenly wide. “Where...where are you going?”

Chapter 479 – Sad Farewells

Cora

“Well,” Hank says, sighing contentedly as he wraps an arm around Sarah’s shoulders. “With Ella here in the city able to patch up anyone pretty much instantly and cure a variety of diseases just by holding people’s hands, there’s not as much use for me here.”

“Oh!” Ella squeaks, and I laugh because I can tell that she feels guilty for making Hank feel a little redundant.

“No, Ella,” Hank says, grinning at her. “Sarah and I just talked about it and I think we can be of more use up in the Northern provinces. There’s a great deal of people there – both humans and wolves – who are without healthcare, and especially without a surgeon.” He shrugs. “I think we can do some good.”

“I think that’s really cool, Hank,” I say, grinning at him.

“I think it’s right,” he says, smiling at me. “But still, I’m glad we got to be here for this, and to meet Jesse.”

“I’m glad too,” I say softly, smiling at my friend. Because as much as my life is full now, and I have less and less time to spend at the clinic...I will certainly miss him.

Hank leans forward to give me a kiss on the cheek, his own quiet farewell, and then Ella walks he and Sarah from the room, murmuring something about Sinclair wanting to say goodbye.

When he leaves, Roger walks quietly over to me, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the door. “What was that all about?”

“Well,” I say, smiling up at him, “you’ll be glad to know that Hank is moving away – up to the northern provinces, actually.” I don’t know much about the kingdom’s territories up there, but I do know that it’s a lot of wild land and a lot of rough living. I wonder, privately, if it will suit Hank and Sarah, who don’t exactly strike me as country folk.

“Oh,” Roger says as he purses his lips and looks towards the door, nodding slowly.

I click my tongue, my face bursting into a grin.

“What?” Roger asks, turning to me.

“I can’t believe you’re not crowing with victorious joy,” I say, laughing and shaking my head at him.

"Well," Roger says, lifting his chin, though he can't fight his smile anymore. "My mother told me that if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all."

I roll my eyes. "Words you've never lived by."

"Yeah well," he says, sinking onto the bed and smiling as he looks at the baby and me. "I'm a role model now. I've got to reform my ways."

"Hear that, Jesse?" I whisper to my sleeping boy. "He's going to reform for you."

"Yup," Roger says, leaning close to peer at the baby.

"I give him one week," I whisper to Jesse, laughing softly.

"I give myself three days," Roger counters, making me laugh harder. Jesse's eyes flutter open a little and he gives a sad little mew.

"Aww, poor baby," I murmur, holding him closer and rocking him so that he'll go back to sleep.

"He just wants to be in on the fun," Roger sighs, stroking a hand over my hair. "Doesn't want to miss a single laugh."

"Well then he's going to have to get a lot less sleep," I say, lifting my head to grin at my mate. "Because we laugh a lot in this family. And I don't intend to stop anytime soon."

Roger nods to me, confirming my thought, and leans in for a kiss.

Ella

Sinclair comes to the bottom of the stairs, Rafe tucked still sleeping in his arm, and frowns up at me as I descend with Hank and Sarah, clearly intuiting my emotions through our bond.

Hank is leaving, going to work in the northern provinces! I say to my mate mind-to-mind, genuinely upset. Make him stay!

Sinclair blinks his surprise for a second, and then he smiles. And how on earth would I make him do that?

I don't know, I reply, scowling. Some sort of...King edict. Just command him.

My mate shakes his head at me and then turns to Hank and Sarah as they reach the ground floor.

“So,” Sinclair says, nodding to Sarah and Hank. “I hear you’re leaving. It’s a shame – you’ll be much missed here.”

“How did you...” Hank says, frowning at his King, and then he glances back at me. “You know,” he says, shaking his head, “I’ll never get used to that.”

“You might have to,” Sinclair says, raising his eyebrows. “I’ve heard the packs in the northern provinces are very tight-knit and have...strange magics.”

“I’ve heard that too,” Hank says, nodding. “Their healing practices are said to be quite unique. I’m very interested to learn from them.”

“Well, I hope you’ll share with us what you learn,” Sinclair says as I come to his side and pout at Hank and Sarah, really not wanting them to leave. “Even just so Ella has an excuse to call you back to the capital every once in a while to throw you a party and see how you’re doing.”

I nod eagerly, letting them know I want that very much.

Sarah laughs and Hank smiles at me. “Thank you both,” Hank says, looking between us. “For such incredible opportunities. And for introducing us. Sarah and I are...” he says, turning to smile at her now and making her blush, “well, we’re very happy.”

“I’m so pleased to hear that,” I say, tucking my clasped hands under my chin and beaming at them. “And you’ll keep in touch?”

“I promise we will,” Sarah says, reaching out to put a hand on my shoulder. “I owe you everything, Ella – keeping in touch is the least we can do.”

“Well, you could stay,” I say, raising my eyebrows, but Sinclair just laughs and tugs me close to him.

“Don’t listen to her,” he says, shaking his head at me even as he smiles. “Your path is your own. Though I hope you’ll let us support your work financially, if that’s appropriate.”

“I will let you do that,” Hank says, raising his eyebrows at Sinclair, his face serious. “There’s a great deal of poverty up there, which is part of why we want to go. A little bit of well- financed medical care could go a long way.”

“It’s done,” Sinclair says, his eyebrows going up as he reaches out a hand, which Hank shakes heartily. “You’ll send me the particulars?”

“I will,” Hank promises, smiling between us.

And then I groan, because I know that's the end of the conversation, and I hug my friends again before they go, making them promise to send me emails and pictures and texts and whatever else it is they can whenever they can.

When they finally leave the house, I slump against Sinclair's side.

"I got one new nephew but I lost two friends," I murmur, sad.

"And you got a new pregnancy," he whispers into my ear, "so I think it's actually even."

My face bursts into a grin and I squeak a little – because, well, I didn't precisely forget. But I did get distracted. Just for a moment.

"How's she doing in there," Sinclair murmurs, turning me and looking me up and down, his protective Alpha instincts coming back in full force now that I'm pregnant again.

"I have no idea," I say, grinning up at him and stepping close. "Everything's exactly the same as it was this morning."

"Good," he murmurs, stroking a hand over my hair. "Let her grow a little, our Princess."

I smile so hard that I have to close my eyes, leaning against my mate and pressing my cheek to his chest as he wraps his free arm around me. "This is the greatest day," I whisper with a sigh. "Even if my two stupid friends did just tell me they're moving away – not even that can kill it for me."

"Don't worry, trouble," Sinclair murmurs, continuing to stroke my hair and hold me close. "I don't think that's the last we've seen from those two."

"Why do you think that?" I ask, lifting my head and peering up at him.

"I genuinely don't know," Sinclair says, shaking his head at me and frowning just a little. "Just a feeling."

"Hmm," I murmur, giving a little shrug. "Maybe the goddess is sending you messages now."

"Maybe," he says, nodding. "She gave me you, after all. Clearly, I am her favorite."

I laugh at this and stand on my toes, begging a kiss from my mate which he gladly gives me.

"Think we should go upstairs and see them?" Sinclair asks, looking up the staircase.

“Nah,” I say, tugging him to the living room where Henry is comfortably settled with a glass of whiskey. “Let’s let them have a minute and talk to grandpa instead.”

Chapter 480 – A New Family

It takes a little over two hours, but finally the last of the doctors leaves, the door clicking shut behind them.

“Finally,” Roger sighs, falling back into the linens of the freshly-changed bed. “Now we just have to get our stupid family to leave and we’ll get some sleep – ”

“Excuse me,” I say, glaring over at him. “If you think you’re tired -”

“Fine fine,” he sighs, turning his head to grin at me. “You’re right. What can I get you, my love? Do you want anything?”

The doctor officially gave me and Jesse a clean bill of health after I delivered the placenta and Jesse had his first feeding and full check-up. It was, of course, a relief to have everything turn out right and relatively easy -especially in comparison to Ella’s experiences – but now that they’re all gone?

Honestly, it all feels very real.

Like now I have to be a mom, and Roger has to be a dad all by ourselves.

“I don’t know,” I say, laughing a little and looking between Roger and our little baby. “Honestly, it’s all kind of weird, isn’t it? All of this fuss and then they just...leave you alone with a baby. To do what you will.”

“I know,” he says, looking at me with wide eyes. “I’m glad you know what to do. I’m totally lost.”

“I don’t know what to do!” I protest, laughing and shaking my head.

“What!?” he breathes, sitting up sharply.

“I’m just a doctor, Roger!” I say, laughing harder now and feeling a little hysterical as well as exhausted. “People come to me pregnant, but then I send the babies home with them! I don’t know what to do with a kid – that’s Ella’s department.”

“Well then,” he says, looking anxiously towards the door. “I take back my previous words. Ella has to stay – for like, ever.”

“Or at least until this kid is six -”

“Can we push to seven?” Roger asks, looking at me with real anxiety that just makes me laugh harder.

There's a little knock on the door but suddenly Roger and I are laughing too hard to answer it. It cracks open anyway and Ella again peeks her head in.

"I thought I heard the hysteria of new parents," she says, shaking her head at us and smiling as she comes into the room. "Are you totally freaking out?"

"Full meltdown," Roger says, wiping a tear of mirth from his eyes. "What are we supposed to like...do with him?" he asks, gesturing to the baby as Sinclair comes in after Ella, shutting the door and grinning at us. Rafe fusses, starting to blink awake in Sinclair's arms.

"You're suppose to love him," Ella says, coming close and reaching for the baby, which I gladly hand off to her. "And, you know. Keep him alive."

"Loving I can do," Roger sighs as Ella folds her legs beneath her on the bed and Sinclair pulls a chair up to the bedside, completing our little group of six. "The rest...we're going to need some help."

"It's not so hard," Sinclair says kindly, smiling down at Rafe who yawns and looks around at us sleepily, a little confused. "They sleep a lot their first couple of weeks. And then, after that, they find ways to tell you what they want."

"Maybe we should trade," Roger says, looking dubiously between Rafe and Jesse. "Yours looks...sturdier."

Ella grins suddenly and looks at me like she's considering the idea but I just laugh and shake my head. "You can't take my baby, Ella," I say, crossing my arms. "Even if Roger is inept, I still like him."

"I didn't say I didn't like him," Roger murmurs, sighing and leaning against me, happy.

Rafe lets out a surprised little screech all of a sudden and all of our eyes turn to him as his own gaze fastens on his cousin, his eyes going wide like he's noticing him for the first time.

Which, I mean, he honestly probably is.

"Do you want to see the baby, Rafe?" Ella coos, leaning forward so that Rafe can meet Jesse face-to-face for the first time.

I smile in surprise and delight when my sweet nephew really does lean forward to see Jesse, his face very curious. Rafe lets out another little squeak, more demanding this time, and reaches out his hands towards the baby.

“Oh my god,” Sinclair murmurs, looking down at his son with a fascinated and pleased expression. “He really does want to go to him!”

“This is Jesse,” Ella says, laughing a little as she beams at her own baby. “He’s your new cousin! And I think you’re going to be best friends.”

“They’d better be,” Roger murmurs. “Because they’re going to be together a lot. It’s going to be very inconvenient if they don’t like each other.”

“Oh,” I scold, giving him a light smack on the chest. “They will. Besides, shut up, I want to watch this...”

And the two of us lean forward as Sinclair sits Rafe on the bed, letting him lean forward and continue to reach for the baby.

“Lay them down,” Ella says softly, her voice a little awed, “next to each other -”

“What?” Sinclair asks.

“Please,” Ella says, almost beyond herself, as if she’s speaking from instinct. “Let’s just...try it...”

Sinclair looks at me and Roger and I just shrug, fine with it if Ella is. I don’t see Roger’s response, but I don’t hear a protest, so I assume it’s okay.

And so Sinclair gently flips Rafe on his back and lays him out on the blankets, and Ella very gently, very tentatively places Jesse next to him, close enough for Rafe to touch.

To my shock, the usually rambunctious Rafe stays very, very still for a moment as he stares at his cousin. And then he begins to turn, and almost gently reaches for Jesse –

And the moment they touch, when Rafe’s fingers brush against Jesse’s cheek, and Jesse’s little eyes flutter open –

All four of us parents take a sharp intake of breath.

Because we all feel it – each and every one of us.

We look around at each other for a split second and then all of our eyes dart back to our kids, who are still touching, just barely, skin to skin.

Rafe babbles a little, saying hello to his new cousin, who just sighs and closes his eyes again.

“Oh...oh my god...” Ella says, her hands going to her mouth for a split second before she reaches down and gathers Jesse back up into her arms. ” Did you guys...”

“Um, yeah,” Roger says, and I turn my head to see him staring wide-eyed at Ella. “Yeah, I think it’s fair to say we all felt that.”

“What was it?” I breathe, fascinated and confused but...not at all scared.

“It’s a bond,” Sinclair murmurs, pulling a now-giggling Rafe into his lap and stroking his broad hand over his son’s hair as he looks around at the rest of us. “Can’t you all feel it?”

Each of us, I think, shifts our minds inwards to that place in our hearts or our minds or our souls where our wolves live, where we access our bonds. And Dominic is right – it’s not a bond with me, not really. But the bond between me and Jesse, which shines rich and bright between us? There’s... something new there, another bond that I can sense beyond it. I can’t reach it, or touch it...

But I know it’s there.

“Oh...weird,” Roger murmurs, his eyes bright now as he smiles at his brother. “Our kids have a bond? Do...do we have a bond?”

“Uhm, only the bonds of brotherhood that we forged sharing a bedroom for ten years,” Sinclair says, shooting Roger a little glare. “I mean, siblings are bonded through their parents, of course, but a bond like this? And between cousins?”

He shakes his head.

“I mean,” Ella says, giving a smug little shrug. “We knew they were special.”

“Just because you like them doesn’t mean they’re special,” I say, rolling my eyes at my sister and reaching out for my baby. Ella laughs and leans over to pass Jesse back to me. I smile when he’s back in my arms, dropping a kiss to his perfect, tiny little cheek.

“I like them and they’re special. What do you think it means?”

We all look to Sinclair, who just gives a little shrug. “I have no idea,” he says, “why should I know?”

“Because you’re the one who figured it out,” Roger says, laughing a little.

“Well,” Sinclair says on a sigh. ”

That’s all I’ve got. Maybe it has something to do with being grandchildren of the

goddess. Or...their gifts, or something. I have no idea.”

“I wonder if any future kids will be likewise bonded,” I murmur, smiling a little as I think of that possibility. Because, honestly, even though I’m bone tired...I’m already starting to forget some of the miseries of pregnancy.

I know that I’ve only been a mom for a couple of hours now but...I already really love it. I’m starting to understand Ella’s mania for more, honestly. I smile down at my baby, thinking that if he’s this great already...

Well, then I probably want like...five more. Maybe not anytime soon...I want to enjoy this one first. But yeah. Quite suddenly, I definitely want more.

“Only one way to find out,” Sinclair says, and I don’t miss the way that he smiles at Ella. I grin privately to myself, but my smile quickly turns into a yawn.

Chapter 481 – New Baby Cousin

Ella

I see a yawn stretch over Cora's face and immediately start to get to my feet. "You're exhausted," I say, "we'll let you get some rest – "

"No," Roger says, suddenly a little frantic again. "You guy can't leave what if – what if the baby cries and Cora sleeps through it – I have no idea what to do "

I laugh at my brother-in-law and shake my head at him. "We're not going far, Roger," I say, pressing myself to Sinclair's side as he, too, stands up. "We're going to sleep across the hall after we make sure Henry gets home safe. You'll be able to shout if you need anything."

"Oh, thank god," Roger murmurs, slumping back against the pillows and putting a weary hand over his face.

"So dramatic," Cora says, rolling her eyes but laughing anyway. I grin at my sister and then move to her side, pressing a kiss to her cheek and blowing one to the sleeping Jesse, my new perfect nephew.

"You guys sleep tight, all right?" I say. "And really – we're here if you need us. Or even if you want us to take the baby in the rolling bassinet – he can sleep in our room – "

"We'll be fine, Ella," Cora says, rolling her eyes at me now.

"They do this all the time in hospitals, take the baby to the nursery so the mom can get some sleep! I could

"Stop trying to steal my baby," she laughs, flapping a hand at me, "just because you miss having a newborn."

"I do," I sigh, again clutching my hands beneath my chin. "They're so cute and tiny then..."

"Come and take your meatball, Ella," Sinclair says on a laugh, holding out my perfect little Rafe to me. And I laugh too, taking Rafe in my arms and holding him tight against my chest.

"You're perfect too, Rafe," I say, kissing his head, "no matter how big you get."

And then Sinclair and I call our soft goodnights over our shoulder and close the door behind us as we pass out of the room, letting my sister and her mate have a peaceful night alone with their new baby.

As soon as we're alone in the hall, I fall back against the wall with an excited little sigh.

"What is it this time," Sinclair says, stopping and grinning at me as I hold Rafe close to my chest.

"I'm just so excited," I say, smiling up at him. "I get to do that again in what, six months!? I love the newborn stage! I love the first night, when you can't sleep because you can't bear to close your eyes and stop looking at them! I'm so excited. I'm not going to be able to sleep."

"You really were born to be a mom, trouble," my sweetheart mate says, stepping forward and running his hand over my hair. I grin up at him, nodding fervently. "Luckily," he says, raising an eyebrow at me. "I do not at all mind the process of knocking you up. Not one bit."

"Dominic!" I gasp, swatting at him a little and covering one of Rafe's ear with my spare hand. "Not in front of the baby!"

"Ella," Sinclair says, laughing at me as I start down the hall. "We have sex in front of the baby all the time – "

"Yes, but that's natural," I say, laughing and throwing a haughty look at my mate over my shoulder, pretending to be more bothered than I am as I open the door to the guest room. "Baby Rafe doesn't need to hear all of your lewd innuendos about what it is you enjoy."

"It wasn't even an inuendo," Sinclair murmurs, stepping close to me in the dark of the room and pulling me to him, a little more roughly than he needs to, just the way I like it.

"Well, mind your manners," I murmur, my voice low and throaty. "Because we have competition now for best Sinclair parents. And I am not losing to those two idiots in there."

"Not a chance," my mate says, laughing his dark little laugh. "We've got them beat hands down."

"I know, right?" I say, wrinkling my nose at him. And my mate kisses me swiftly before giving me a swat on the rump.

"You get the baby ready for bed, I'll make sure dad gets home?" He asks, heading for the door.

"You got it," I say, giving him a quick thumbs up and a wink. Sinclair nods to me, smiling,

and heads out the door, leaving me in the dark with the baby.

“Well, Rafey,” I say, laughing as I swing the baby up over my head, making him give a tiny shriek of joy. ” You got a new cousin today, and a new bond! What do you think?”

Rafe burbles happily as if in reply and I smile at him as I carry him over to the little changing table I set up a few hours ago, starting to get him ready for bed.

“I’m very happy for you, Rafe,” I say sternly as I change his diaper and start to put his pajamas on. “But if you like your new cousin more than your new little sister, just because you have some weird kind of bond?” I look at him for a long moment, shaking my head. “If that happens, we’re going to have big problems. Okay?”

Rafe just grins at me, babbling as I pull up his tiny zipper.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I say, smiling as I pull him up into my arms. “And I’m holding you to it, even though you don’t even really speak English yet.”

When Sinclair comes back into the room about half an hour later, Rafe and I are cozily settled on the bed, each of us warmly wrapped up as he plays with some of his soft blocks and I lay quietly by his side, talking to him and giving him a cuddle whenever he looks for it. But I grin when my mate shuts the door behind him, smiling at us.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” he says, starting to pull off his blazer as he comes to the bed.

“Please do,” I say, sitting up a little. ” We missed you.”

My mate comes immediately to bed, pulling off his shoes and slipping into the bed fully dressed so he can be with his little family sooner. I smile when I see his eagerness, knowing he feels precisely the way that I feel: that this is our happy place, when we’re all cozy together with no great pressures or problems weighing on us.

“Are you sleepy?” he asks. “Hungry?”

“Both,” I say, giving a little shrug. ” But, we should wait until Rafe falls asleep to attend to either.”

Sinclair nods, glancing at his son before opening his arm to me, inviting me in. I accept immediately, scooting over so that I’m curled up by my mate’s side, a thrill running through me at the warmth and closeness of him.

“I’d love you anyway,” I say quietly, ” but I have to say, I really love that you’re basically a furnace of body heat that always keeps me warm.”

Sinclair laughs with both pleasure and surprise when I say this. "Glad I can be of service," he murmurs, dropping a kiss to my cheek and pressing closer. "What made you think of that?"

"Don't you feel it?" I ask, turning to look at him. "It got so cold suddenly. I don't know what happened."

"I guess I didn't," he murmurs, "but, apparently I'm a furnace, so maybe it makes sense that I -"

But suddenly he stops, his jaw falling open a bit as his gaze falls on the window.

"What?" I ask, but I don't tense because the feeling he passes down the bond is joy and wonder. Eager, I turn, trying to see what he sees

And suddenly, my eyes light on the window to. "Oh my god," I say, my voice a little breathless. "It's – it's snowing

Huge, gorgeous flakes of pure white snow drift slowly down from the sky, dancing gracefully across the window pane.

I watch them for a long, fascinated moment before I frown a little. "Isn't it ... isn't it way too early for snow?" I ask, confused.

"Well," Sinclair says, laughing a little. "When your mom is a demigoddess who controls the weather, probably not."

"Ohhh," I say, finally getting it. "Oh, that is so special," I murmur, pressing a hand to my heart, "what a wonderful way to welcome your baby to the world

"Welcome, baby Jesse," Sinclair sighs, pulling me close against him and smiling at me as we watch the snow. Rafe crawls over to us and puts up his arms so that I will pull him into my lap, a request which I happily oblige.

"And welcome Princess Babygirl," I murmur, smiling and laughing a little at the ridiculous placeholder of a name. Sinclair laughs along with me. "Cora doesn't know it yet, but this is for you too. We love you so much already."

I sigh, feeling the warmth of my mate behind me, and my sweet baby in my lap, and the new bond with my little girl growing within me -And I close my eyes, feeling totally, completely blessed.

Chapter 482 – Growing Family

“What do you mean I made it snow?” Cora frowns at me as she bustles around the kitchen, making mimosas. “That’s ridiculous – you must have imagined it.”

“It totally snowed!” I protest, laughing and shaking my head at her, turning to Sinclair at the table for support.

“It did,” he says, raising his eyebrows at Cora even as he hands Rafe another slice of apple. “The news is completely baffled by the sudden cold-snap that immediately disappeared by morning. They’re calling it the duke’s miracle.”

“What!?” Cora gasps, spinning to stare at Sinclair wide-eyed.

“That’s so cool,” Roger says, grinning at baby Jesse in his arms, who peers up at his dad with sleepy eyes. “Mom’s magic, Jesse,” he whispers. “It’s very cool.”

“You guys are just teasing me,” Cora sighs, leaning against the counter as I turn the knob on the stove, cutting off the fire beneath the pan of eggs, sausage, and bacon that I’ve finished frying up.

“Dominic is dead serious,” I say, nodding to Cora eagerly with raised eyebrows. “Seriously, word got to the media that the nation’s beloved duchess had her baby and that night it snowed unseasonably early – people are freaking out.” I laugh a little as I starting to portion our breakfast out onto plates.

“Oh my god,” Cora says, covering her face with her hands. “I didn’t even mean to do that – do you really think it was me?”

“You tend to affect the weather when you’re emotional,” Roger says, grinning at his magical mate with a happy shrug. “I think it makes a lot of sense.”

“Oh, that’s so weird,” Cora says with a sigh, shaking her head at Roger and then at me. “People are going to start figuring out what we can do, Ella,” she says. “We’re going to need to have some sort of story.”

“I think my secrets kind of already out,” I say, giving a little grimace. ”

And why do we have to tell anyone anything? Just let the rumors fly – it’s not anyone’s business but ours.”

“Yeah,” Cora says, rolling her eyes at me before turning back to her previous task of adding the world’s tiniest amount of orange juice to nearly-full glasses of champagne. “Until they burn us at the stake for being witches or something.”

"We won't let them do that," Sinclair murmurs, smirking a little as he focuses his attention on Rafe's breakfast.

"Plus," Roger says, shrugging at Cora as if it's inconsequential, "it's not like it will work. You can just rain on the fires, Cora."

I burst out laughing at this and Cora, despite herself, laughs too.

"Well, whatever," she sighs, carrying a mimosa over to Roger and Sinclair first, who murmur their thanks. "I guess you're right and it doesn't really matter at least not until our children develop some weird gifts that end up being dangerous or something. Or make them social pariahs."

She returns to the counter, handing me a glass of mimosa and taking one for herself, raising it to all of us in a toast. The rest of us raise our glasses as well, toasting baby Jesse and then drinking deeply

Well, they drink deeply. I fake mine, just letting the bubbles of the champagne press against my lips before putting the drink down on the counter, neatly tucked away where Cora can't see it.

Because as much as I would usually love to toast my nephew's birth with a festive breakfast beverage...

Well, my reasons for not drinking are so much better. Still, it's Cora's day, and I don't want to steal her thunder just yet. Not that I think she'd mind, just...one happy announcement at a time.

"How did he sleep?" I ask, raising my chin towards Jesse.

"Fitfully," Cora says, crossing her arms and frowning over at him. "But that's normal, right?"

I nod, smiling at her a little. "He'll find his patterns soon, don't worry. How did you sleep?"

"About the same," she says, giving me a little smile. "I kept waking up every time he like...moved."

I grin at her, remembering that habit in the early days of a new baby. "You'll get used to it too."

"Well, some people," Cora says, laughing already and glancing over at Roger, "are already used to it."

“You cannot begrudge me my sleep, Cora,” Roger says, looking at her completely unashamed of himself. “It is self-care. I will not apologize for it.”

“You have a baby to care for now,” she throws at him, though she smiles. I grin, truly appreciating their teasing relationship. “You need to be a little more self-less.”

“I will care for the baby during the day,” Roger says, gesturing to the baby cradled in his arm. “At night, he’s your son.”

We all laugh again, mostly because we know he’s not serious. Roger, like Sinclair, will certainly do his share of childcare without complaint, day or night. He’ll just tease Cora about it more, mostly because he knows that it makes her laugh.

“How can you take care of the baby all day,” Sinclair asks, turning mischievous eyes on his brother, ”

while you run the military from the palace?”

“I’ll bring him with me,” Roger says, grinning down at Jesse like it’s obvious. “Never too early to get the boy used to a war room.”

I grin, picturing Roger in his admiral’s uniform with a baby asleep on his shoulder, a little barf dribbling down his back. And honestly, I don’t mind it as much as I probably should. These Sinclair dads – I don’t think they’re going to have any hesitation about incorporating their children into the day-to-day activities of their lives.

As I consider it, though, my hand passively drifts over my stomach, because I wonder quietly if the same will be true when there’s a girl in the picture. Would Roger have said the same thing – that it’s never too early for the child to get used to a war room if Jesse had been a girl and not a boy?

I sigh a little, hoping that it’s not true. Because this little girl – she’s going to grow up with two big Alpha boys who are barely a year older than her, and I’m damn well going to have a word with them if they try to cut her out of their activities just because she’s a girl.

You all right? Sinclair says, passing the words discreetly into my mind but keeping his eyes on Rafe as Cora sets out the breakfast plates that I forgot about in my musings.

Yes, I say, letting him see my light worry but also letting him know that it’s not about anything big. Just...mom thoughts.

He nods to me, giving me a little smile as I take my seat next to him.

Our breakfast is lovely, but it goes far too fast. Sooner than I'd like, Sinclair puts a hand on my knee and looks at me with a sad expression, silently letting me know that we really have to get back to the palace. He's a King after all and while our family comes first and we'll always make time for them, we do have responsibilities.

"Oh no," Cora says, pouting as she looks between us. "So soon?"

"I'm sorry," I say with a sigh. "I mean, if you'd just take me up on my offer to move into the palace while Jesse is a baby

But she just laughs and waves a hand at me as she gets up and clears our plates, dumping them in the sink. "Not a chance – you just gave us this house, we're not moving again just to have a free nanny."

"A free auntie," I say, getting up and moving around the table to say goodbye to Roger and Jesse. "Which is much better. Bye baby Jesse! See you soon!" I leaning down to kiss my baby nephew while Roger holds him safe in his arms.

"Ella," Cora says, frowning as she holds up my undrunk mimosa, which she has found still sitting by the sink. "

Why didn't you drink this?"

At the same moment, just as I'm standing up straight, Roger suddenly grabs my wrist, his eyes flaring wide as he looks up at me. "Wait a second..." he says, his voice suspicious.

I go still, my eyes flicking to Cora, who looks at me in confusion, and then to Sinclair, who starts to grin at me a little bit, shaking his head as he stands with Rafe in his arms.

"Ella," Roger says, slowly turning my wrist over and giving it a long sniff. " Oh my god!" he gasps, staring up at me in sudden delight. "You are! You totally are! How did I miss this!?"

"Miss what?" Cora asks, her eyes flicking around at us.

"You were distracted," Sinclair says, laughing and shrugging.

"Miss what!?" Cora demands again, standing up straight. But then her eyes go wide as she looks at the undrunk mimosa in her hand. "Oh my god!" she gasps.

"Well," I say, turning to grin at my mate. "Secret's out now, isn't it?"

Chapter 483 – A Small Gathering

Ella

It takes us longer than I know Sinclair would prefer to get out of Roger and Cora's house that morning, mostly because Cora spent so much time freaking out, hugging me, and scolding me for not telling her immediately. But in the end they let us go, Cora wiping her eyes and Roger giving us a big smile, baby Jesse asleep in his arms.

I hold Sinclair's hand the whole ride home, squeezing it, so happy and excited. We're just so blessed right now, and I'm doing everything I can to bask in that glow. My mate, my baby boy, my baby girl on the way?

What more could I ask for?

When we get back into the palace, Sinclair walks me back to our suite of rooms, though I can tell his mind is already on other things.

"You can go," I say, balancing my little meatball Rafe against my elbow while I give Sinclair a little shove on the shoulder. "You don't have to walk me back into the rooms – I'm already inside our house!"

"Indulge me, Ella," he says, giving me a little glancing smile as he pushes open our door and holds it open for me. "I can feel my instincts kicking in already – I'm not going to want to leave your side for the next six months."

"Oh sure," I say, rolling my eyes at him and carrying the baby over to his changing station. "Like overprotective pregnancy Alpha is so different from overprotective new dad Alpha."

"It is different," he says, smirking at me as he leans against the wall, watching me make quick work of Rafe's dirty diaper, our little baby happily babbling as I do. "Or at least, it feels different to me."

"Well, whatever keeps you eagerly at my side," I say, smiling at him with a wink.

"What about you?" he asks, raising his chin towards me. "Are you feeling any different yet? I feel almost bad, honestly – you barely got finished breastfeeding. You didn't even get to do any of the fun non-pregnant things, like shots of tequila. Or a whole lot of sushi."

"That's okay," I say with a sigh, snapping Rafe's onesie shut and lifting him back up into my arms, where he squeals and reaches for me, grabbing fistfuls of my hair. "I'll just take a raincheck on those," I say, stepping close to my mate and letting him wrap me in my arms. "After this next one is born and ready for solid foods, you owe me two children's

worth of debauchery.”

“Done,” he says, smirking and cupping my face in his hands, planting a little kiss on my mouth. “Except, knowing you, you’ll probably be planning baby 3.”

“We’ll see,” I say, giving a happy little sigh. “But do you know? There is one thing that I’m particularly excited about.”

“What is it?” he asks, genuinely curious.

I break into a broad smile and turn towards the bed, striding to it as Rafe gives an excited little giggle. “The re- establishment of the nest!” I say, throwing one hand in the air. Sinclair bursts into laughter as I start tugging at the blankets, arranging them into a comfortable circle that looks incredibly cozy. Honestly, I want to climb in right now.

“This is going to be the second version of the nest,” Sinclair comments, and I can tell by his happy tone that he’s pleased. “Next 2.0. Are you planning innovations? Improvements?”

“Well, it’s a Queen’s nest now,” I say, sinking happily down onto my bed, taking Rafe with me. “And it has to accommodate a Prince as well as a growing Princess,” I say, grinning at my son. “So yeah, I’m going to need some funds,” I continue with a sigh, looking seriously up at my mate. “Like, five to ten thousand dollars?”

“For pillows?” he protests, laughing.

“Oh no,” I say, grinning. “That’s just the blanket budget, and the snacks. The pillows are going to be extra.”

He shakes his head at me, still laughing, but comes over and again takes my face in his hands. “Whatever you want,” he says, smiling.

“Exactly what I like to hear. Do you have to go?” I ask, a little mournful. I mean, I just made this nest, and it does look so cozy...

“Yes,” he murmurs, leaning down to press another kiss to my mouth. “But I’ll be back to help you christen the nest later.” He sighs and steps away, handing me a tablet off the bedside table. “Order whatever you want, but please, Ella, try not to bankrupt us.”

“No promises!” I sing, leaning back against the pillows and settling Rafe in next to me as Sinclair laughs and heads for the door. “Come on, baby,” I sigh as I start to click through the tablet, Rafe starting to crawl around in the blankets next to me. “Let’s start by ordering you and Sissy some matching outfits...we’ll get some for baby Jesse too...”

Two Weeks Later

“Cora!” I call into our little closet. “Is he ready!? Let’s go!”

“It’s my party, Ella!” Cora calls back, though I can hear her laughter.

“I knowww,” I whine, a tuxedoed Rafe sitting calmly on my hip. He also looking curiously towards the closet where Cora and getting Jesse dressed in his own little tuxedo. Jesse’s two weeks old now, and just the cutest baby in the world – Rafe excepted, of course – and I can’t wait to see how he looks in the matching tuxedo I got him.

“You know it’s ridiculous, Ella,” Cora says, coming out of the closet finally with her happy little boy, who is all smiles pretty much all the time. I squeal when I see him, just barely able to hold his little bald head up. “He’s just going to barf all over it, plus he’s only going to wear it for an hour! He has to be naked when you present him to mom.”

“It will be the most elegant barf!” I laugh, hurrying close and tickling Jesse’s fancy little belly. “And I don’t care if he wears it for an hour or a minute, it was too cute to resist.” I laugh, completely undone by the sight of Cora’s and Jesse, all dressed up. Rafe babbles happily and reaches forward, trying to touch Jesse, which he always does. I grin when I see it, as I always do these little boys, they really do have a bond already. Rafe gets so excited whenever Jesse comes into a room.

Jesse, even though I don’t think he really understands what’s going on, smiles when he hears Rafe and gives a happy laugh.

“Your guests are gathered,” Roger calls from the door to the living room, raising an eyebrow in our direction. “Are you going to come out here, or just hide in here with the kids all night?”

“We’re coming,” Cora calls, rolling her eyes at him and pretending to be exasperated even though I know she’s not. “Sorry you had to entertain guests for like, ten seconds alone, Roger.”

“It was absolute torture,” he says, crossing the room to us, a half-drunk glass of champagne in his hand. “Why do you think I came in here? I missed my buddies.”

Rafe gurgles and waves to Roger, which makes me burst into a happy, proud smile. He hasn’t said any words yet, but he’s getting there.

“Ohhh, you’re looking very dapper,” Roger says, bending down to peer at his son. “The Goddess will be very impressed, I’m sure.”

“How could she not be,” Cora says, smoothing down the very little bit of hair that Jesse

has on his head. "He's very perfect."

"Yes, he is," I say, laughing a little as Roger slips an arm around Cora's waist and we together head for the door. " And very excited for his baptism, I know."

"We all are," Cora says, grinning at me. And in this moment I know she's remembering Rafe's baptism, and her own experiences there.

But this time? It's my turn. Because I'm the godmother, and I'm the one who gets treated to a little insight into baby Jesse's future world.

And I absolutely can't wait to see what's in store for him.

Chapter 484 – Jesse’s Baptism

Ella

A few hours later our entire party is gathered in the forest close to midnight, sipping champagne and mingling quietly as we wait for the hour to be right for Jesse’s baptism. We have a priestess here as well, of course, though this one is much more thoroughly vetted than the last.

I’m in incredibly good spirits as I look around at our party of loved-ones, truly enjoying my night, but when my eyes fall on Cora I see that she’s gnawing her lip a bit with anxiety.

“Oh, Cors,” I sigh, reaching out and putting a hand on her shoulder. I glance over at where Roger is standing a few feet away next to Henry with the baby in his arms, both of them talking with Sinclair, who has a sleeping Rafe held tight against his shoulder. “It will be all right!”

“I know it will,” she sighs, twisting her hands together and speaking softly to me. “And that even if it’s not, it’s not like I can change anything, you know?”

“I know,” I say, remembering how anxious I was at Rafe’s baptism. “But mom she can’t have anything really bad in store for him. It’s going to be all good things!”

“Oh, come on, Ella,” Cora says, shooting me a little glare. “It’s not like mom gave us the easy road just because we’re her daughters. We grew up in an orphanage. We had dark priests stalking us our whole lives.”

“But we had each other!”

“I just want my baby to have a good life,” she sighs, looking anxiously up at the sky, almost as if she can bully our mom into giving her baby a blessing if she glares at the moon enough. “It tortures me to think that he’s going to have to go through...half of what we did.”

“He’s going to have ups and downs, like the rest of us,” I say, wrapping my arms around my sister. “You can’t spare him from that.”

“Yes, I can,” she growls. “I’ll just... lock him in a very comfortable little basement. Very safe, very cozy.”

I laugh and shake my head at her. “Your baby is going to have a big life, Cora,” I say, giving her a squeeze.

“Yeah well, we’ll see how cheerful you are six months from now,” she says, reaching out

to trail a little finger down my baby bump. I grin as I look down at it, tapping on my little bond with babygirl to say hello. But she's sleeping or something at the moment and doesn't reply, which is fine. I'm distracted anyway, and I like to give her my full attention when she nudges the bond.

"I know," I sigh, happy but knowing that Cora's right. "I'll be a mess then, I'm sure."

My pregnancy thus far has gone really well. In many ways it's not that different from my first two weeks with Rafe, except with significantly less drama in my personal life. And while I treasured every single moment I was pregnant with Rafe, this pregnancy? Well, it's kind of been a dream – the kind of pregnancy I used to fantasize about. Safe, comfortable, sharing the experience with my little family?

I'm so grateful to have gotten here.

But still, tonight is about Jesse – and as much as I could gush about my pregnancy for days, I want to focus on him.

"The hour grows close!" the priestess calls an old woman this time, dressed in the silvery-white robes of the goddess. She gives us a warm, motherly smile and holds out her hands.

"Go time," I say, slipping my arm to Cora's waist and walking forward with her. Our mates meet us there in front of the goddess, and Henry draws close as well. Our guests gather around, everyone quieting now so they can hear the words.

Cora reaches to take Jesse from Roger's arms and Roger hands him over readily. I dip my head and give Rafe a little kiss on his sleeping cheek before Sinclair hands our baby over to Henry for safekeeping while we're in the forest.

"I'll keep him warm and safe," Henry says, giving us a wink. "Enjoy yourselves."

"We will," Sinclair assures him, running a hand over Rafe's dark head before turning back to the priestess.

"I can't believe you're going to take my little baby into the forest without me," Cora whispers, her voice breaking a little. "I haven't been away from him in...ever..."

"It'll be fifteen minutes," I say, laughing and touching my sister gently on the cheek, even though I remember precisely what she's feeling. I feel emotion stirring in me as well, the product of the special day combined with my memories, combined with my love for our growing little family.

I take a deep breath and sniff, turning towards the priestess.

"You can't start crying already," Sinclair murmurs, his hand warm on my back.

"I can do whatever I want," I mumble back, laughing a little. "I'm a Queen."

He laughs with me, but we turn our attention to the priestess, who reaches out her arms for Jesse. Cora gives a half-hearted little sigh, but passes him over, making many of our gathered friends laugh a little in understanding.

The priestess smiles down at the wide-awake little Jesse, who looks like he peers back at her curiously, seeming to understand, somehow, that it's an important day.

"Who presents this child for dedication?" the priestess says, smiling at the four of us.

"We do," Roger replies, his voice steady and more serious than it usually is. "His mother and I."

The priestess nods, and I smile, recognizing the words and the process from Rafe's ceremony. "And who will carry him to meet the Goddess?"

"We will," Sinclair answers, nodding down at me. "Ella and Dominic Sinclair, his godparents."

The priestess smiles at us and bids us to take the baby, giving us instructions that are more ceremonial than anything else. After all, Sinclair and I know what to do, even if we haven't done it before. Together we step forward, and Sinclair takes baby Jesse in his arms. I loop my arm through his elbow, take one last look over my shoulder at Cora, and then together my mate and I carry our nephew into the darkness of the forest.

We walk for what feels like...too long.

"Is it supposed to be this far?" I ask, peering into the darkness for the pool that's supposed to appear ahead.

"I don't know," Sinclair says, his voice perfectly calm. "It's a magical forest, Ella. Maybe it takes everyone a different amount of time to get to the pool."

"What!?" I hiss, looking around suddenly. "I thought it was just...the woods!"

He laughs, giving me a glance before turning his eyes back to Jesse, shifting the baby in his arms so that he can look around. "Look how interested Jesse is," he laughs. "Maybe it's taking a while because Jesse's having a good time. Maybe he wants it to take longer."

“Well, hurry it up, little baby,” I say, giving Jesse a little poke in the belly that makes him smile. “Auntie’s wearing heels, and her feet hurt in this rough terrain.” Jesse’s just wrapped in a little swaddling blanket now, but Sinclair is right – he’s very cheerful and interested, though I don’t think his eyes can actually see much.

Almost as if on cue, a light suddenly appears ahead of us in the forest pretty silver haze.
a

“Looks like it worked,” Sinclair murmurs, reaching out to take my hand. I press my palm to his, giving it a squeeze.

“Good job, baby,” I say, smiling and Jesse. And then the three of us together move forward, ready to introduce him to his grandmother and get a little hint about his fate.

Chapter 485 – The Goddess' Light

The pool we approach is wide and expansive – more of a large pond, or even a lake, really, shining below the open sky. I tilt my head curiously at I look at it, remembering Cora describing the pool as small and well tucked away in the forest. This one...

Well. Maybe it's different every time, for every child, every pair of godparents. I look up at the moon and smile, thinking fondly of my mother and all the blessings she's given us. And also how she can sometimes be...a little bit tricky.

"Ready?" Sinclair murmurs.

"Almost," I quip, stepping close to him and lifting myself up on my toes, tilting my chin up for a kiss. He smiles and bends his head, pressing his mouth briefly to mine.

"Ready now," I say, grinning at him.

Sinclair takes a moment to look at me in the moonlight, running a hand over the length of my loose hair, and then we step forward to the edge of the pool.

"Goddess," he murmurs, not bothering to raise his voice – he knows she can hear him. "We bring to you, tonight, this child our nephew Jesse. So that he may begin to know you."

"We wish to show him your light," I say, repeating the words that Henry taught me as part of the ritual, a little shiver running down my spine as I do. "And in doing so, let you see him and bring him into the spirit of your grace."

I smile as the light reflecting off the pool grows brighter, insubstantially at first but bolder as the moments pass. Mom – she's here, and she's ready to meet Jesse.

"Here you go, baby," Sinclair murmurs, holding Jesse out so that I can reach over and quickly untuck his swaddling. Then, with the baby safe in my mate's broad hands, Sinclair and I step forward to hold Jesse out over the pool, basking in the light of the moon.

I smile as I look down at Jesse, as the moonlight pools over him. He kicks his little feet and fusses for a moment, frowning a bit up at the sky before giving a little laugh. I can't keep myself from laughing a little bit too, smiling down at my spunky little nephew, loving him so much already.

"He is called Jesse Sinclair," my mate says, his voice a little choked. I glance up to see him gazing at the baby too, his first nephew, the child of his brother and best friend. "His parents, Cora and Roger, have asked us to bring him here to dedicate him to you. We do so in their name."

I grin, tucking myself close to my mate's side, a thrill running through me. How many babies have been dedicated to the Goddess with these words, been welcomed into wolf culture? How many more will we, my little family, get to bring into the fold?

But there's no time to ponder these questions, because as I gaze at the baby something begins to stir in the air beyond him.

"Oh," I breathe, my eyes going wide. And then I take a deep breath, and am swept away in the vision that my mother gives us, the hint of the fate that she's built for him.

My heart seizes as the first images fly by – a happy childhood, a handsome little boy, full of laughter and pranks. And by his side at almost every moment is another little boy – dark haired, always a little taller, always laughing and shouting at his cousin's side. Rafe – Rafe! Happy, and healthy, and Jesse's best friend, as I always dreamed they'd be.

The urge grows in me to reach out and seize each of the moments as they fly past a camping trip, gathered around the fire with Roger and Sinclair, slightly older but so happy – a birthday party with Jesse's face brightly lit by eight candles

I want to grab each moment of the vision, to study them each independently, to get the details in full

But tears slip down my cheeks as I give in to the experience, knowing that this – like life – will fly by, and if I spend my time trying to hold onto the pieces I'll miss it completely.

And so I watch, and my joy deepens when I start to realize that next to Jesse and Rafe, in every vision as they grow older, there's a little girl too.

A little girl with a heart-shaped face and rose gold hair – between her brother and her cousin at all times, laughing with them, fully engaged with their games and antics –

And then a vision comes of the three of them, draped over the pillows of a couch, fully exhausted with their arms and legs thrown over each other like exhausted puppies, sleeping wherever they landed

And though there's no real proof of it, I know she's mine – the little baby growing in my stomach right now. She's there, and she's every bit as much a part of their little group as I hoped she'd be –

Jesse – he has a rich friendship with his cousins, and the three of them... they're a matched set.

I wipe at my face, hardly able to see through the blurr of my tears but eager to do so

because there's more

The three – they're older now, much older, in their early twenties, all dressed in black and gathered around a fire somewhere, in a room with stone walls that looks out over a dark landscape. They're chatting and laughing, their cheeks ruddy and healthy, tired but happy. Jesse – he's so tall and he looks just like Roger, with Cora's warm brown eyes. He laughs easily, tossing a cashew at Rafe who

God, I almost sob to see it – but who looks like Sinclair's double

And our little girl! She's there too! I shake my head at...at how much she looks like me

The three, they're a team, and wherever they are, they're there together. I shake my head, not understanding, because they certainly don't look like they're at college, not dressed like that. But wherever they are ...well, they're happy, and they're together, and it's more than I could ask for.

The vision fades, replaced by the next, and Jesse is alone. The laughter is gone from his face, replaced with determination. He moves through a darkness flecked with stars – a darkness which feels...palpable, and as I watch, I see him grab the darkness, shifting it, moving through it like...like he's pushing silk in water...

And then, when he steps out?

I gasp, because...it's...god, it looks for all things like a different world, a world wrapped in darkness. He looks up into the sky and I blink to see that there is no moon. Not merely a night without a moon but...an...an absence there that I can feel. He bares his teeth, and pulls a dagger from his hip, and storms forward

I blink then, because – because –

The vision fades. There's nothing else.

"That can't be it," I breathe, my voice frantic. I whip my head up to my mate, whose face is likewise pale. "That can't be it! He – we need to know! He has to come back!"

Sinclair looks at me and shakes his head – he just doesn't know, it's a mystery –

"That can't be it!" I shout, suddenly livid, and I stumble forward, my feet sinking into the pool as I spin and glare up at the moon.

"Ella!" Sinclair shouts, reaching for me.

"You can't leave it like that!" I shout up at the moon. "You can't send me back to my

sister with that as your final image! I won't go!"

"Ella please," Sinclair shouts, seeing me stumble and almost lose my balance as my shoes sink into the mud at the bottom of the silver pool.

"I'm not going!" I shout, waving a hand at Sinclair but not taking my eyes off the moon!
"You owe us more than this!"

And as I glare up into the sky, soft words float to my ears – barely audible words, kissed by starlight.

Chapter 486 – Mothers and Fathers

Ella

“Ella, you can’t just demand

But I glare at Sinclair, slicing my hand through the air and shaking my head as I realize that he can’t hear what I’m hearing.

And the first thing that comes to my ears...

Is a laugh.

“All right, little daughter,” a soft voice says, and I instantly recognize it as my mother. “I stopped there for a reason, but if you get out of my pool, I’ll give you one more.”

I narrow my eyes at the moon but do as the Goddess bids, stepping out of the pool.

“I ended there because I do not know the outcome,” she says, her voice sorrowful. “His mission will be...his own. But, I do know this...”

And I reach out and put a hand on Sinclair’s arm, very tense. I gasp a little as a new vision forms very fleeting, very brief –

But in it, Jesse is an old, old man wrinkles crinkle around his eyes as he smiles down at a child in his arms

His grandchild, or maybe his great- grandchild or maybe not a child of his blood at all, but certainly one he loves very, very much –

It’s gone as soon as it comes, but it’s enough.

Jesse – he lives. And it’s enough.

“Thank you,” I breathe, my eyes turned up now towards the sky, the tension falling from my shoulders. ”

Thank you.”

“Trust them,” the Goddess says, her words even fainter now than they were before. “Even if you don’t trust this world, or me, trust them.”

And I nod, understanding, committing to it.

And suddenly, whatever magic was here lifts, and she’s gone.

The light from the pool fades until it's just...a lake, or a pond again.

"What...what just happened?" Sinclair asks, staring down at me with wide eyes.

"Did you see?" I ask, desperate to know.

"See what?" he asks, shaking his head at me. "See you plunge into the pond yelling at the sky like a literal lunatic!?"

"See the last vision!" I explain, and when he continues to stare at me I let out a deep breath. "Okay. Guess that one was just for me."

"She showed you more!?"

I nod slowly. "She knew I was upset when the vision ended with Jesse in darkness. So, she showed me him as an old man, holding a tiny child."

My mate scowls at me and then glances up at the moon, as if he wants to get mad now but he's a little too scared of her for blasphemy. "Well, that hardly seems fair," he murmurs. "Why do you get extra visions?"

"Well, you," I say, pointing down at his shoes, "have warm dry feet. So. Fair trade."

He laughs at me almost despite himself, shaking his head as he wraps Jesse up tightly in his blanket. The baby's face is peaceful now, his eyes starting to drift shut. "Leave it to you, trouble," he murmurs, "to bully the Goddess into showing you extra magical visions."

"I'm his godmother," I say, grinning and taking the baby from Sinclair's arms when he offers him to me, probably knowing that I'm upset and want to hold the baby close. "If I'm not going to bully a diety for him, who is?"

"I'll leave it to you," Sinclair sighs, wrapping a warm arm around my shoulders. "Come on. Let's go get you into some warm socks."

About an hour later, Sinclair makes good on his promise and comes out of Cora and Roger's closet, tossing a pair of fluffy socks onto my lap.

"All right, Ella," Cora says, frowning down at me with her baby in her arms, "spill."

"I told you," I say on a sigh, "it's not bad."

But, of course, she doesn't believe me. Cora took one look at the wet hem of my gown,

my ruined shoes, and Sinclair's pale face when we came out of the forest and went totally still. We tried to put on a good show, ensuring the group of all the wonderful things we saw which is true! – but Cora didn't say much at all, ushering everyone into the waiting vans so that we could all get back to the house as fast as possible.

She's a polite hostess of course, and she made sure that everyone was happily settled in the house with food and drink so Jesse's celebration could continue, but I could tell: the entire time, she just wanted to get us alone so that she could get the full details.

Roger is just as worried, though he's doing a bit better playing it off.

"They said it's all right, Cora," he says, putting a hand on her shoulders. "

They wouldn't say that if it wasn't true." He looks between us now, a desperate hope in his eyes.

"We wouldn't," Sinclair assures him.

"They would," Cora snaps, glaring at Sinclair and me. "They would say whatever polite nonsense they could until they got us alone and then they would break the news to us! So!" she's almost shaking with her anxiety now as I finish pulling the warm socks over my feet. "Spill! Please!"

"Cora," I murmur, reaching for her, and my sister lets me pull her down onto the bed. I wrap my arms around her shoulders and she bursts into tears. "No, Cora, really – it's all right!"

"Is it?" she gasps. "Then why are you all wet – why did Dominic look like that when he came out of the forest!? What went wrong?"

"I'll tell you everything," I murmur, rocking my sister back and forth. "But first I need you to tell me how much you want to know."

"What?" she gasps, pulling back and looking at me.

"It's the same choice you gave me," I say quietly, looking between her and Roger, "at Rafe's baptism. You said there were some details that perhaps a mother shouldn't know – but that it all turned out right. Well, the same thing is true here – it really does all turn out right, Cora. The Goddess – she showed me a vision of Jesse very old, very happy – he lives a long life."

Cora lets out a long, shaking breath, and then her shoulders begin to tremble as she tucks her head down against her baby and starts to cry tears of relief.

“Cora,” Roger says, his voice breaking on her name. I take my arms from around her shoulders so Roger can take my place, and he sits next to her on the bed, pulling her and the baby into his lap and holding them tight against him. Sinclair comes and stands next to me and I lean against his side, resting my head against his muscled stomach. Very suddenly I want to be holding Rafe but he’s downstairs with Henry, because I knew Cora would need my whole attention for this.

I sigh, denying myself the impulse to run down and get him. My sister needs me more.

We stay like this for a long few moments while Cora catches herself. Then, when she’s ready, she lifts her head and looks into Roger’s eyes. He nods steadily to her.

“Whatever you want, Cora,” he murmurs.

Cora turns her eyes to me and nods, finally ready to know.

Chapter 487 – A Powerful Gift

Ella

Cora wipes at her face with the palms of her hands. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I just...I kind of flipped out.”

“The vision wasn’t bad,” I say, “I promise it wasn’t. And we get it – if you came out of the baptism ceremony looking like you’d jumped into the pool? I’d have freaked out too!”

“Yeah, well,” she murmurs, glancing down at my stomach, “maybe I’ll just do that out of spite in six months, see how you like it.”

I laugh then, the noise surprising me, and Cora’s face breaks into a tentative smile.

“There’s my girl,” Roger murmurs, lifting a hand to wipe at the last of her tears.

“I think we need to hear all of it,” Cora says, nodding to Sinclair and then to me. “Please. Just...maybe just for this baby, our first.”

“Okay,” I whisper, nodding. And then Sinclair and I tell her all of it – of all the wonderful things we saw for Rafe as he grows up, and his happiness with his cousins. And then we tell of the darkness we saw, and the incredible way he moved through it – of the challenge clearly laid out for him in his future.

“Wow,” Roger says, a little baffled as he looks down at his baby. “I have...I have no way of really comprehending what any of that means,” he murmurs.

“It was difficult to know what we were seeing,” Sinclair replies, looking down at me for confirmation. I nod. “Then, Ella got really pissed. That’s when she jumped into the pool.”

“What?!” Cora gasps.

I give a shrug. “I wasn’t going to let her end the vision there. So...we kind of got into a fight, and then she gave me the last image – of Jesse old and happy, so that I’d go away.”

Cora bursts into laughter then, looking down at her little baby. “We chose the right godmother for you, baby,” she sighs. “Always getting her money’s worth.”

“Damn straight,” I say looking up at Sinclair with a very clear told-you-so expression on my face. “Only the full baptism experience for my baby nephew.”

“So, what do you think it means?” Roger asks, looking between us.

"I don't know," I reply, resting my hand on my chin and gazing at the baby, wondering about his very strange and very interesting future. "He's going to be very close with Rafe and with the new baby girl. And the way he handled a dagger, and the way he was dressed – I think he's going to be a warrior."

"That fits," Cora sighs, looking up at me with a little guilt in her eyes. "We saw Rafe was going to be a warrior too. So, at least they'll have each other."

A little anxiety turns in me at that, but I just nod, tucking the information away. I mean, considering who his dad is? I can't say that I'm surprised. But I can think about how I feel about it another day.

"I think it's more than that, though," I murmur. "Something mom said"

"Wait, what?" Sinclair says, breaking in and stepping away from me a little, looking down at me. "She spoke?"

"Oh yeah," I say, giving a little apologetic laugh and a shrug. "I forgot you didn't hear her. My bad."

"Your bad!?" he says, appalled.

"Yes, my bad!" I return, rolling my eyes and brushing a hand through the air at him, dismissive. I turn my eyes back to Cora. "Mom said that Jesse's mission will be his own and that she doesn't know the outcome. But honestly, Cora, he seemed...very capable. And very powerful."

I look up at Sinclair, wondering if he felt the same. He sighs as he looks at me and then turns to nod to his brother and my sister. "That was the impression that I got too. That whatever gift the Goddess gave to him... it's a powerful one."

Cora and Roger are quiet for a long moment, shifting their gaze to their little boy. Sinclair and I sit quietly, letting them process their thoughts.

"You know," Roger says quietly, thoughtful. "If you'd asked me before he was born if I wanted him to have a weird, cool, powerful gift, I'd have said hell yeah. But now that he's here? And he's so...tiny?" Roger takes a deep breath that breaks my heart a little bit, shaking his head as he stares at his son. "I wish his gift was something stupid, like... being really, really good at bowling. Or just being magically kickass at Scrabble."

"He's going to get that from me anyway," Cora murmurs, smirking a little, and I bite my lip to see the humor returning to these two. Because if they're joking about it...I think it means that they're strong enough to get through it.

“The last thing mom said to me,” I say quietly, and Cora’s eyes flash up to me with a little bit of dread in them – like she doesn’t want any more information tonight –

I laugh and shake my head. “No, it’s good!” I say, putting up a hand. “She said to trust them,” I continue, nodding. “Trust our kids. And it felt very true – I mean, we’re all aware that we’re not bringing kids into an easy life. They’re born into responsibilities. We have to raise them to be strong, and then when they’re grown? We have to trust them to handle themselves in the world.”

Sinclair nods slowly, agreeing with me. “And I don’t think the Goddess would have given Jesse a powerful gift if she didn’t think he could handle it,” he says softly, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t think she’s in the business of screwing over her grandkids.”

Cora sighs, nodding too. “Just giving her daughters extreme anxiety,” she mutters, sighing and running a hand over Jesse’s sleeping heads.

“I think that’s probably all moms,” I say, standing up and leaning against my mate, who pulls me tight against him. “But...I mean, I think it’s going to turn out okay.”

“Why do you say that?” Cora asks, looking up at me again, I think hoping for another little hint from mom, who of course knows more than we do.

“I just have faith,” I say, letting my lips turn up into a smile. “These kids – they’re going to be good eggs and we’re going to love them a lot. If they end up with the fate of the world in their hands?” I look up at my mate and shrug. “Then I think the world’s got a pretty good shot.”

Sinclair smiles at me, leaning down to give me a little kiss before we turn back to Cora and Roger.

“You guys coming downstairs?” I ask, nodding towards the door, eager to get to Rafe and give him a snuggle and whisper to him how loved he is if he can’t hear me. even

“In a minute,” Cora replies, giving me a tentative smile that has a great deal of warmth behind it. Because even if she is still spooked a bit – I know she agrees with me. Our kids are going to be great – we just have to have faith in them.

“We’ll be waiting,” Sinclair says, giving them a steady nod, and together we let the new parents have a minute alone with their son.

Chapter 488 – Cozy Little Nest

Ella

“Kinda wish I knew what Rafe’s power is going to be now,” I murmur as we lift Rafe’s carrier out of the car early the next morning.

Cora and Roger stayed up in their room for a few more minutes, but they came downstairs much more cheerful and ready to celebrate. I watched them carefully a long time, checking to see if they were just putting on good faces for their guests – but honestly? From everything I could see, they really decided to embrace the good news the Goddess gave them.

It was a wonderful night and a brilliant morning.

But now? Now I want to go to sleep.

“I already know what his gift is,” Sinclair says, slinging an arm around my shoulders as we start into the palace.

“You do?” I gasp, looking up into his face. But then I scowl when I see his smirk and realize that he’s kidding. “Oh, you liar.”

“No really,” he says, raising his eyebrows at me. “His goddess-given power is just... handsome.”

“What!?” I squeak, a little aghast, my mouth falling open at this ridiculous idea.

“Come on!” Sinclair says, laughing and grinning down at me. “Look how good looking this kid is!” he continues, gesturing down at our son in his carrier, who is sleeping with a little bit of drool dribbling out the side of his mouth.

“Oh my god,” I groan, speeding up my steps and attempting to move ahead of my ridiculous mate.

“I’m serious!” Sinclair pushes, laughing, easily catching up to me with his long legs. “Didn’t you see him in that vision, all grown up? He is a handsome guy – it’s got to be his power.”

“Stop flattering yourself, Dominic,” I mutter, stepping into our elevator and jabbing the up button with my thumb. “He looked just like you.”

“Precisely my point!” Sinclair says, wrapping my arm around my waist and tugging me close against his side as the elevator begins to raise, “he’s going to bring nations to their knees with just his smoldering gaze – ”

“Cover your ears, baby!” I call to Rafe, rolling my eyes at Sinclair. “Your dad is going to raise you to be vain and overly pleased with yourself -”

“I want the child to know the full extent of his power! He has to be prepared! He, too, is going to have demigoddesses just falling all over him

I can't help it at this – I burst out laughing. “Stop it!” I gasp, smacking Sinclair on the chest. “We're trying to raise a nice boy – not an egomaniac!”

“But you're not saying that I'm wrong,” my mate says, smirking and cupping my face in his gigantic hand.

“Well, I don't think it's his gift,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him as the doors open. I bite my lip though. “But he really was handsome, wasn't he? In the vision.”

“I'm telling you, Ella,” Sinclair says, grinning at me as we step into our hall. “If it's not a gift it's a curse. He's going to have to keep a fly swatter at his side all the time to keep the girls off him – ”

I burst out laughing again at the mental image, leaning hard against my mate as my cheeks and my side begin to ache. We pass a few staff in the hallway who smile happily at us as we make our way down the hall to our door. Sinclair opens it, pressing a warm hand to my back as I head inside.

“Honestly,” I say with a happy sigh, looking down at our kid, “I think maybe his Goddess gift is...sleeping soundly. Through everything.”

“He's just used to his loud mom,” Sinclair sighs, dropping a kiss on my cheek before I crouch down to lift the baby out of his carrier.

“Don't you listen to anything daddy says,” I murmur to my sweet, floppy little baby as I gather him up in my arms. “He is a big ugly liar tonight -”

“I'm not ugly!” he calls from the closet, because of course his alpha hearing caught my private conversation with my son.

“He is,” I whisper, grinning at Rafe as I tuck him against my shoulder and stand to carry him into the closet, intent on getting him changed into some pajamas. “And whatever he says, you get your good looks from me.”

“Well, that I won't contest,” Sinclair says, grabbing me to his half-naked body the moment I step through the door.

“Wise man,” I say, lifting myself on my toes for a kiss. Sinclair gives it to me a long, lingering one, and then he pats me on the ass before reaching for some pajama pants.

There's a happy little silence in the closet then as we all get ready for bed even though it's about seven in the morning. These baptisms – they're exhausting, but there's something nice about having an entire day of rest afterwards. Like the baby's big day gives us all a little respite to sit back and think about our world, our lives.

When we're all ready, Sinclair and I give Rafe a kiss and then tuck him into his little crib. I sigh after I put him down, crossing my arms over my chest. “Maybe we should take him into the nest tonight,” I murmur. “Keep him close while we can.”

“You can't sleep with them every night,” Sinclair says softly, leaning in to kiss me on the side of my head, just above my ear.

“You just try to stop me,” I growl. “Maybe I'll gather all the children with us in bed until they're sixty – ”

“That's a bad idea,” my mate says, wrapping his arms around me and walking backwards towards the bed, tugging me with him so that we both fall back onto the mattress together.” You'll traumatize them.”

“Fine,” I sigh, curling up with my mate in my fresh, cozy nest. “Just until they're twenty, then.”

“Okay,” he agrees, tucking his head down against my shoulder and playing with my hair with one hand, the other moving down my side to caress my little baby bump. “How's this one doing?”

“I think she's okay,” I say, sighing happily. And then I bite my lip, turning my mind fully to my daughter for the first real time tonight. “It was amazing to see her too, wasn't it?”

“It was,” he murmurs. “What a gift it was to be Jesse's godparent.”

“She's so pretty,” I whisper, my voice squeaking a little in excitement.

“She looks just like you,” Sinclair whispers, laughing.

“I know,” I say, giggling. “Just think she'll have Kings falling at her feet, nations collapsing under the weight of her smolder – ”

“Girls don't smolder,” he murmurs, laughing along with me.

“This one will,” I sigh, putting my hand on top of his on my stomach. “I think she's going

to be really special, Dominic," I whisper.

"I think so too," he whispers back. And I smile, and snuggle up against my mate, and wrapped up warm in each other's arms we fall asleep.

I'm my wolf in my dreams this morning, running breathless through the forest, the wind rippling through my hair. I toss my head back, sprinting for the joy of it. Sinclair is by my side, his own gigantic wolf keeping easy pace with me, and I nip at his side, teasing him, urging him faster.

He snaps his teeth at me playfully and obeys, speeding up to pass me, and at his heels is a little brown pup – yipping his joy as he chases his father's tail. I laugh inwardly, joy racing through my heart, watching Rafe and Sinclair go.

But I don't chase after them, because pressed close to my own side is my little charge. She's just barely there half visible, half substantial in the morning light that filters through the trees. But I can feel her – in my heart and down my bond. My own little twin, a little rose-gold pup, who raises her snout to the sky and howls for joy.

I dip my snout, and give her a quick lick across the head, and she peers up at me with eyes so happy they squint.

And then I run, with my daughter by my side, all morning long.

Chapter 489 – Time Grows Short

Five and a Half Months Later

Ella

There's a strange atmosphere in the palace today and I admit that I don't quite know how to feel, because everything is half dread and half excited anticipation.

At least, that's how it is for everyone else.

For me? For me it's just a great deal of discomfort.

"Ella," Cora scolds as I try to bend over and pick up one of Rafe's socks from the floor. "Let me do that –"

"I can do it!" I gasp, reaching for it –

But then I stumble and almost fall over, and Cora catches me by the shoulders.

"Enough!" she snaps, shaking her head at me. "Back to the nest! Stop getting out of it! You're six full months pregnant, Ella – full term! For heaven's sake, if you fall over I'm scared you'll split like a watermelon and just spill the baby out."

"That might be better," I mutter, glaring at the errant sock and doing as my sister says, heading back for my bed. "This baby is big, and I'm not precisely looking forward to pushing her out."

"Well, what did you expect," Cora says, flipping the sock into a hamper and walking behind me to the bed. "You decided to have babies with the most gigantic man I've ever seen."

"First," I say, holding up one finger as I sink down on to my bed and start to tuck my legs under the covers, "I did not choose to have children with that gigantic man, I chose a nice slim sperm donor for my first child –"

"Yeah well, you chose to have the second baby," Cora reminds me, raising an eyebrow at me as she sits down on the edge of the bed.

"And second," I say, choosing to ignore her logic, "Rafe was a little baby. It's not my fault that this one is very content to stay in for as long as she possibly can." I sigh, resting my head back against my pillows and putting my hands on either side of my belly.

"Poor sister," Cora coos, reaching out to stroke my stomach as well. "She'll be here soon enough."

What Cora says is true I've been in pre-labor for a couple of hours now. I'm having mild, irregular contractions which Cora says is unlikely to be Braxton Hicks at this late stage. So, baby girl is coming soon, even if she's taking her time about this as well.

"Remember how crazy it was?" I say softly, my mind turning to the past. "When Rafe was born?"

"I do," she replies. "Do you miss it?"

I peek through my eyelids at her, smirking a bit. "Do I miss almost dying and fearing for my life, having to stop and give birth in a strange palace because the roads to the hospital were blocked?"

She shrugs. "Well, do you?"

"Maybe a little," I murmur, and then I laugh, shaking my head. "It was all very exciting. Poor baby girl needs a fuss too."

"We'll give her plenty of fuss," Cora says, running her hand comfortingly across my stomach. "Besides, two months from now we get to have her baptism, and then it's Aunt Cora's revenge."

"Cora," I groan. "Honestly, it wasn't so bad -"

"I'm going to come back from it soaked," she says, grinning at me, "covered in mud, with an insane story about your daughter's future -"

"You know," I say, sitting up on my elbows and glaring at her, "you don't have to be her godmother -"

"Oh whatever, Ella," Cora says, rolling her eyes and laughing. "Like you have any other friends."

"I have plenty of friends -" I protest, my mouth falling open, but our completely unserious fight ends abruptly when the door opens and our mates come in, our sons in their arms.

Rafe turns in Sinclair's arms and gives a happy little cry when he sees me. "Mama!" he calls, raising his hands above his head and then leaning over, reaching for me.

"Whoa, kid," Sinclair says, laughing and catching Rafe before he hurl himself to the floor in his eagerness to get to me. When they're about halfway across the room, Sinclair puts Rafe on his feet and he totters over to the bed, absolutely breaking my heart with how

cute he is.

“Hey, Rafey!” I call, reaching out for him. He bangs into the side of the bed and giggles, reaching for me, and Cora obliges him by lifting him up so that he can crawl over to me and cuddle up in my arms.

“God, when did he get so big?” Cora murmurs, shaking her head at Rafe.

“Don’t remind me,” I say with a sigh, tugging my little boy close and giving him a big kiss on the head. He’s one now. I cried the entire day of his birthday. Sinclair was honestly a little freaked out.

“He’s a show off,” Roger says, his voice a little bitter as he sits down next to Cora with Jesse in his lap. Sinclair moves to the other side of the bed so he can sit in his spot next to me.

“Roger’s just jealous,” he says, leaning over to kiss me on the cheek. “Because Rafe is faster than Jesse.”

“Jesse’s six months old,” Cora says, rolling her eyes at the dads.

“He could be faster for six months,” Sinclair says dryly, trying to hold his smirk.

“Don’t worry, Jesse,” Roger says fondly to his son, softly petting the silky brown hair that’s started growing on his head. “You’ll beat that meatball someday – you’re lighter and quicker –

I burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of my family, shaking my head at all of them. “I can’t believe you’re debating which kid is going to win a footrace,” I say, “when I’m laying here, in agony – ”

“She’s not in agony,” Cora says, waving a dismissive hand, “not yet at least – ”

“In agony,” I insist, reaching forward to smack her on the arm.

“Sorry, my Queen,” Sinclair sighs, wrapping his arms around me. “But the good news is that everything’s wrapped up for now Roger and I have cleared our calendars, so now there’s nothing to do but concentrate on you.

“Yeah, so you’d better make it fun,” Roger quips. “When Cora was in labor, there were drinks – you’ve got to live up to this, Ella.”

Cora laughs and smacks her mate, shaking her head at him. He flinches and then falls back on the mattress in pretend agony, taking Jesse with him and making the baby

laugh, muttering something about an abusive wife and mother.

I laugh at them but turn to put my head on Sinclair's shoulder. "How's it going out there?" I ask. "Everything okay?"

"Nothing for you to worry about," he murmurs.

"I know that," I say quietly, watching him closely. "Doesn't mean I don't want to know. It's my nation too."

Sinclair gives me a sad little smile and presses his forehead to mine. Then he passes a bunch of information down our bond at once, letting me see and feel that the Atalaxians have been pressing their advantage. They're aware that our military is rapidly getting itself together and the Atalaxians losing the leverage they had. It means that everything is going according to plan, but it also means an increase in actual fighting along the front.

"I'm sorry, Dominic," I murmur, putting a hand on his cheek. "I know it's not easy to send people to war."

"Nothing for us to worry about today," he sighs, turning his head and pressing a kiss to my palm. "Today is about you, and the baby."

I nod, agreeing, letting us turn to that better thought instead. It's been harder than I thought it would be, to separate our happy personal life from the trials of war when you're the King and Queen...in so many ways, the two bleed into each other.

But we've been pretty good about celebrating our happy moments when we get them. It's pretty much all we can do.

"I can't believe you haven't named the baby yet," Roger says, interrupting us with a frown. "Didn't you have Rafe named like, from the get-go?"

"We did," I say quietly, running my hand over my stomach. "But he was easy – he told us what he liked."

"With this one, we've got names we like picked out," Sinclair says. "But we've said them to her, like you did with Jesse, and she didn't indicate any standouts."

"So, we're waiting to see what she looks like when she's born. See if something clicks."

"I think that's sweet," Cora says, smiling at me softly. "Very old-school, very human, when so much about these wolf kids is already known before they're born."

“I know,” I say, smiling down at my stomach. “I think it’s kind of cool that she’s so different.”

“Next one we have,” Roger says, laying Jesse out flat on his stomach so that Jesse can practice lifting his head with some tummy time, “we’re just picking the name out of a hat. Keeping it spicy.”

Cora lowers her eyelids a little and shakes her head at me, making me laugh.

But the laughter very quickly ends when another contraction starts. I exhale a long breath, pressing my eyes shut as my body tightens somewhere low within me. It’s not precisely painful yet – but it is intense.

“Time to get the stopwatch ready, daddy,” Cora says, nodding to Sinclair. “I think these are close enough together to start timing them.”

“I’m on it,” Sinclair says, pressing a kiss to my cheek as he hops out of bed. ” And in between, we can put the boys on the floor and use the stopwatch on them, see which one really is faster – ”

“Oh my god,” I mutter, breathing through the pain.

Cora laughs. “We’re not racing the babies while we wait for Ella to go into delivery!” she says, shouting after my mate as he ducks into the closet to find the stopwatch he uses in the gym.

“Oh, baby,” Roger says, sitting up with Jesse in his arms, patting Cora consolingly on the knee. “Yes...yes we are.”

Chapter 490 – Ella Gets Ready

Ella

I take deep breaths, working to breathe through the contraction. Sinclair is seated on the bed next to me, one hand on my lower back, the other clutching my left hand as I squeeze his fingers, hard.

“You’re doing great, Ells,” Cora says, there on my right, coaching me through it. She was the obvious choice to help me deliver my baby, even though three other doctors wait patiently behind the door to our living room, as well as a small team of delivery nurses.

It’s all overkill, I know – but, well, why not have them on hand just in case. But in the room? It’s just the three of us for now. Roger and Henry are out there too, taking care of Rafe and probably drinking brandy and smoking cigars, for all I know.

The contraction ends and my head falls back as I pant, pressing my eyes shut and working hard to save my energy. Babygirl – she’s taking longer than Rafe, which is fine, it’s just...a completely different experience. While I was physically battered last time, this time I’m just...exhausted.

I can feel Sinclair’s anxiety for me down the line of our bond, even if he tries to hide it. He releases my hand, shakes his out a little bit, and then raises a cool washcloth to my head, patting away the sweat there.

“Thanks, baby,” I murmur, turning my face to him a little bit.

“Almost there, Ella,” he replies, supportive.

“He’s right,” Cora says, bending down low to check on my progress. “We’re going to start pushing on the next one.” She raises her head and grins at me. “You ready?”

“Are you kidding?” I say, raising my head to glare at her a little. “I’ve been ready for hours.”

My sister’s smile deepens as she stands up, moving over to the door to call the delivery nurses in so that there are some extra hands to help with the baby.

“Little Princess,” Sinclair says, giving me a squeeze. “She’ll be here soon.”

“I’m going to be jealous,” I mutter, glancing at him and working hard for a joke, even though I can feel the next contraction coming on, “when there’s another girl in your life, stealing all your attention.”

“Never,” he replies, kissing me on the side of the head. “You’re always my best girl.”

“Better be,” I gasp, but then all jokes are put aside, because the contraction comes on in full force. I groan as the pain grasps me and Cora moves quickly to the bedside, helping me better position my legs as she coaches me through it.

“Okay, Ella!” she says, her voice eager. “Let’s start to push!”

And so I do – I bear down, and put my full force behind it, working to bring my baby into the world

The pain is...agony. My groan turns into a low moan and then a shout as I push, my world turning dark at the edges. I keep pushing, still hearing Cora’s encouragement, feeling Sinclair tense at my side.

But as I gasp a breath back in the contraction fades and my eyes flutter open.

“She’s coming fast now,” Cora says, her voice excited, “you’re almost there, Ella! A few more pushes – ”

But her voice fades away and – and the shadows at the edge of my vision, they don’t fade –

I frown, blinking, trying to understand Because, I mean...I’m not passing out. This is not the darkness at the edge of my vision that I’ve felt before when I’ve felt faint. This is – what the hell, it’s real shadows curling at the edges of my room...

“Do you...” I ask, my voice panting as I whip my head, looking around the room, “do you guys see that?”

Sinclair’s hand is on my face, turning it towards him now, his voice worried. ” See what?”

“The...the shadows,” I say, pulling my face from his hand, looking around the room again. The shadows – they’re growing.

“Ella,” Sinclair says, his voice shaking with worry. “Cora – what’s -”

“I – I don’t know – ” Cora says, looking at me. “Ella? What...”

But her voice fades out, and the room grows dark as the shadows overwhelm it.

And then, suddenly, Cora and Sinclair freeze next to me, and the room becomes somehow a shadow of itself, looking like...like a room in a dollhouse, or something – only half real in comparison to...

To the man who stands at the center of the room, who looks like he's made of shadow itself. Except his eyes, which burn bright as coals in his face.

"Hello, Ella," he says, his voice low and rolling, like thunder.

My eyes go wide as he moves a few steps forward and shadows clear from him, revealing a tall, broad-shouldered man with an angular face, impeccably dressed in rich fabrics, each a darker shade of black. "Congratulations," he continues, giving me a short, teasing little bow, "on the birth of your first daughter."

"Who," I gasp, terrified and still in a great deal of pain, though my birth process is somehow...paused – I'm in the middle of it, but it's not progressing – I gasp, and my hands fly to my stomach, worried for her.

"It's all right," the man continues, walking to my side so that he looks down at me with that burning gaze. "I've transported you, temporarily, to a pocket realm – only taken a second of your life. When we're finished our little chat, you'll be returned, safe and sound. No threat to your child."

"Who," I stutter, starting to get mad, "who are you!?"

"You don't recognize me?" he asks, the corner of his mouth turning up. "I'm afraid your mother has neglected you, then, if she hasn't bothered to teach you to recognize the presence of her husband."

"Her...her husband?" I gasp out – and then my eyes go wide as I put the pieces together. My mother – goddess of the light, and the moon, and wolves frequently paired, rather unhappily, with her sometimes-paramour, the God of Darkness.

"Well," he says, with a sigh, "husband for lack of a better term. You wolves with your mates – makes love so simple, doesn't it?"

"No," I growl, glaring at him, even more afraid now than I was before what on earth is he here for is he -is he going to try to take my baby!?"

He laughs, smiling down at me. "I like your spirit, little wolf – you remind me a great deal of your mother."

"Why are you here!?" I shout, terrified, still wracked with the pain of labor.

"Because it is my right to be here," he snaps, leaning down a little, holding my gaze. "You are the child of my beloved, my wife – you should have been mine, had she not been foolish enough to go choosing those mortal men to sire you. And so, while you are not biologically mine, I have what might be considered...a vested interest."

I shake my head at him, still not understanding what the hell this has to do with my daughter's birth.

"I would have been there at your birth," he says, straightening up, "and your sister's, had I known you existed. I was denied that right, and so I am here," he shifts his gaze now to my stomach, "to witness hers."

"Wha..." I shake my head, my mind thinking too many things at once, "why not Rafe? Jesse?"

He shrugs. "The sons belong to their fathers. The daughters – they are the true children of the moon."

My brow knits together at this cryptic statement, but I have no time, really to think on it because the God – he holds out a hand to me.

Instinctually, I flinch away.

He laughs.

"Your mother," he says, shaking his head with a sigh, keeping the hand outstretched. "She taught you not to recognize me, only to fear me. But not only danger lurks in the darkness, moon daughter. Great beauty is there as well."

I stare up at him, anger roiling in me now. "It wasn't my mother who taught me that it was your horrible priests chasing me and Cora our whole lives trying to steal my son – "

The Dark God tilts his head back and laughs, of all things. My frown deepens. "Those priests – " he says, flicking his hand dismissively, "all mortal politics, Ella. The priests – I gave them power centuries ago before I lost interest. Whatever they're doing today is their own business, not mine."

I shake my head at him, starting to bare my teeth. "Get out of here," I snap, "return me to my mate – "

The God of Darkness smiles so broadly it crinkles the skin around his eyes. "Such fire, little wolf," he says, chuckling. "I do wish you had been mine." He sighs and tilts his head, his calm only stoking my anger further. I open my mouth to issue further demands but he simply raises his hand again, and I feel – quite obviously under his control – the instant urge to hush.

"Enough," he sighs. "I will return you to your home and your task in a moment. All that is left is to deliver my gift."

"A...a gift?" I stumble over the words, horrified at the idea.

"A gift," he continues, nodding. "For your daughter. From me."

Chapter 491 – A Gift

Ella

I go rigid at the idea of this dark god giving my daughter anything.

“No,” I gasp, attempting to push myself away from him – but I struggle to move

“Fear not, moon daughter,” he says, the corner of his lip tilting up. “I do not give curses to those who are my chosen ones – only gifts.”

And with that shadows begin to swirl in his hand. My eyes go wide as they build and build into an orb of smoke and shade.

“No!” I protest again, my voice a little breathless this time.

“Careful, girl,” he growls, taking a step closer, bending over me now. “If you anger me, I will not be so eager to bestow my gift. You would not to incur my ire for your life, instead of a blessing for hers, would you?”

I cringe away from him, not knowing what to do – not knowing which will be worse-

The God of Darkness stretches out his hand over me and the shadows begin to spill down from his fingers, surrounding me.

“A blessing,” he murmurs, “for the first granddaughter of the moon from her benefactor. Long may she live, dwelling in darkness as well as light.”

The shadows, when they touch me, are soft – gentler than I imagined they’d be, like velvet or mist. When I breathe, they flow into me through my nose and my mouth. I gasp, worried – but the smoke, it tastes faintly of...of mint, and cool mornings, and it soothes my aching throat...

I look up at the God in wonder, tilting my head at him.

“See?” he says softly. “Not all that dwells in darkness is wicked.”

And then he smiles at me – a wayward, vicious thing – and gives another short bow before

Before he disappears.

And I blink, and the world – my room – it’s real again.

“Ella?” Cora says, abruptly in front of me now, shining a light in my eyes.

“Ella!” Sinclair gasps at my side as I blink rapidly, trying to clear my thoughts. “Are you –” he spins his head to Cora, “is she all right!?”

“I’m – um I’m fine,” I murmur.

“Your eyes,” Cora says, dropping her flashlight and taking my face in her hands, studying me with horror on her features. “Ella, they went all black you were frozen in place –”

I nod, taking a deep breath, the scent of mint still clinging to the back of my mouth. As I exhale I run my hands over my stomach and check on my bond with my daughter –

It’s still there. She’s just as strong – just as uncomfortable, ready to be born

“It’s okay,” I say, nodding to my sister, to my mate. “It – um –” I hesitate for a moment, torn between wanting to explain and the feeling of the next contraction coming steadily on. “It was it was really weird, all right, but right now?” I shake my head at them, a little frantic, “I think we need to push.”

Cora snaps immediately back into doctor mode, moving down on the bed to position herself between my knees, nodding. “All right, Ella,” she says, pulling me a little lower so that I’m flatter on my back now. “When you’re ready, you push.”

“Ella,” Sinclair growls next to me, and even as the contraction takes hold I turn my face to him and press my eyes shut, passing all of my emotions down our bond – my fear, and my shock, but alongside it my conviction that...that I’m okay, right now, and so is the baby but we’ve got to concentrate on this.

“All right,” he says, his voice low as he sits up and puts his hands my shoulders. “Let’s do this.”

And, with my mate behind me, and my sister ready to welcome my little girl, I push with all my might.

Half an hour later, our little baby girl is born.

I’m inconsolable as Cora places her in my arms, the tears dripping down my face as I peer at my baby, reaching out a finger to stroke her teeny tiny fingers, her perfect little nose. She shouts her unhappiness and shakes her little head, which only makes me laugh as I try to wipe my tears away.

“She’s perfect,” Sinclair breathes, tucked close behind me, peering at our baby over my shoulder.

“She really is,” I say between gasping breaths. “Oh god, she’s so cute – ”

Cora laughs, coming to sit next to me and stroke a hand over her little head. We’re quiet for a long moment as I press my child against the skin of my chest.

“She’s precious,” Cora murmurs, her voice almost reverent. “And I love her, and I’m going to be her favorite aunt.”

“Only aunt,” Sinclair murmurs, his voice a little dry.

“Even if she had sixty,” Cora coos, tapping the baby’s little belly with a single finger, “I’d be the best.” She leans forward, kissing me on the cheek. “I’ll give you two a couple of minutes, all right? Go break the news to the drunk ones in there.”

I turn my face up and kiss my sister as well as she scrunches her nose at me and turns to the door, taking the team of nurses with her. Everyone did such a wonderful job – I’m so grateful to them

But honestly, as much as I want to shout my thanks out after them, all I can do is stare down at my perfect little girl.

I lean back against Sinclair as I study her face and he wraps his arms around me, doing the same.

“She looks just like you, Ella,” he breathes, fascinated.

“What!?” I protest, honestly a little shocked. “Dominic, she’s all scrunchy

He laughs at this, and I can feel him shaking his head. “Newborn scrunch aside – her features? And the shape of her face? Rafe is all me, but Ella...this one is you.”

“Little baby girl,” I murmur, rocking her a little and passing love and comfort down our bond so that she settles, just a bit. I can feel the tumult of her emotions down our bond – she’s happy to be close to me, but cold, and a little frightened. She cries the sweetest little mewling sounds, and I cuddle her close, thinking that it must be so hard, being brand new to the world. I do my best to let her know that she’s all right, that I’m still right here. I press a kiss to her forehead, loving her so much already that I can hardly bear it.

Outside the windows of the palace we can hear the crowd start to cheer as the announcement goes out – their Princess has been born, safe and sound. They started to gather late last night, wanting to be the first ones to lay eyes on her. And today? I had peeked out the front window earlier as I paced the halls, trying to ease the bangs of labor, and was shocked to see the masses of people waiting out there, eager to lay eyes

on her.

"I can't say their enthusiasm is misplaced," Sinclair sighs. "She's a really good baby."

"Hear that, baby?" I murmur, smiling at her. "They're cheering for you!"

We take a long, quiet moment together before Sinclair reaches a hand out and strokes my hair. "Ella," he says quietly, and I hear the worry come back into his voice. "What... what happened? Earlier, when you -"

But I shake my head, because of course I know precisely the moment he's talking about. I turn a little so that I can see him and quickly, briefly, give him the fast version of what happened, because I know that we only have a few minutes before the doctors come back in, and Rafe comes to meet his sister, and we have a great deal to do.

My mate goes pale as I tell him how the Dark God took me away into the pocket realm, how he gave our daughter some kind of gift, how he ensured me it was a blessing and not a curse.

"But from the Dark God," Sinclair murmurs, shaking his head, his voice heavy with dread, "who knows what a blessing is to him."

"I know," I say, my voice soft, a little mournful. "But honestly, Sinclair, as it ...came to me, the gift – it didn't feel bad. He was angry at mom for keeping secrets from him for all of these years but I did not get the impression, from the gift itself, that he wanted to hurt the baby or use it as vengeance."

"Then what did it feel like?" he asks, confused.

"I don't know," I say with a shrug. "It felt...a great deal like an open door." As the words fall from my mouth I have no idea where they came from, and that they make absolutely no sense. But, somehow, they're right.

But still, as I look down at my baby girl, my stomach twists with anxiety for all the things it can mean for her future.

Chapter 492 – Princess

Ella

“So you’re all right? You’re both all right?” My mate asks, pressing his forehead to mine, still reeling from the strange news of the Dark God’s gift.

“We are,” I say, nodding, sure of it. And then I shift again, passing the baby to him. “See for yourself, new papa,” I sigh, placing the little girl in her father’s arms.

On Sinclair’s face, and through our bond, I see his heart absolutely melt. “Oh god,” he sighs, shaking his head as he stares down at his little girl. “I’m a gonner, Ella. This one she’s already got me in the palm of her hands, even as I hold her in mine.”

“Don’t worry,” I sigh, curling up next to him, indulging in the sight of my mate the one I love most in the world falling in love with our tiny daughter, as I’ve already done. “I won’t tell her the power she wields.”

“It will be our secret,” he says with a nod and a little smirk on his lips. We’re quiet for a moment, studying her, when suddenly I realize that she doesn’t have a name.

“What do you think?” I ask quietly, resting my head on his shoulder. “Is she an Emma? Or an Eloise?”

My mate’s smile deepens as he looks up at me, and I already know his answer before he says it, because it’s precisely the same as mine.

Those names are great – but they’re not hers.

“Nah,” Sinclair says, grinning at me before turning back to his little girl. “She’s totally, completely an Ariel.”

“I know,” I sigh, tracing a finger down her cheek. “Welcome to the world, Ariel Sinclair. You are already so, so loved.”

And Ariel stretches her mouth in a wide yawn before snuggling down in her father’s arms, happy and content. Sinclair and I both laugh to see it, and I know that his heart, like mine, is so very full. I pass my joy and love down the bond to both of them, and am totally thrilled when Ariel gives a little tentative pulse of love back as she gets used to her new surroundings.

The next hour or so is busier than I’d like, with the doctors returning to the room so that I can finish the after- business of labor and ensure that our sweet Ariel is healthy and happy. But even as I feed her for the first time, and deliver the placenta, and take a shower, and am completely exhausted through it all, I can’t stop smiling and

turning towards Ariel in the room, eager to keep my eyes on her.

My baby – my little girl. I'm so filled with excitement that she's here, that she's mine. God – her whole life is out there in front of her, and I just can't wait to see her live it.

Once the doctors have given us the final okay – at least for now, the nurses, of course, will be on hand all night in case we need help with anything – we settle in together as a family. Roger comes into the room with a tearful Rafe on his hip as Cora finishes bundling Ariel into a swaddle and hands her off to Sinclair. Henry wheels into the room after Roger with a sleeping Jesse in his lap, looking excitedly for his first granddaughter as he closes the door behind him.

"Mama!" Rafe shouts, his voice so terribly sad it breaks my heart.

"Ohhh, baby," I murmur, rushing over to Roger and taking my eldest baby up into my arms. "It's all right, we missed you!"

"It's probably the longest he's gone from your side in...months, Ella," Roger murmurs, smiling at me and giving me a little hug as Rafe rests his head against my chest. Henry and Cora come close, Cora wrapping her arm around Roger's and resting her head on his shoulder.

"Maybe ever," I sigh, shaking my head. He really is my little Velcro baby pretty much always with me. But, then again, it's not entirely his fault I'm could be accused of being an overly -attached parent.

But I don't know if I mind that. I just... like being around my kid. Kids, now.

"Poor little guy," I murmur, stroking Rafe's sweet head and turning to where Sinclair walks over with the baby. "He missed us."

Rafe sits up with a little cry and reaches a hand out to Sinclair, wanting him close too.

"We're sorry, kiddo," Sinclair murmurs, smiling at his son and taking Rafe's hand, leaning over to kiss it. "But we were busy! Mom was doing all the work to bring you a new little sister."

Sinclair turns a little then, showing Rafe the baby, and Rafe sits up straight to peer down at Ariel

We all stay very still for a moment, watching the siblings meet for the first time, but suddenly Rafe gives a little cry of disgust and turns his head away, pressing his eyes shut and gripping my robe tight in his fists, not wanting to let me go.

We all burst out laughing at Rafe's tiny jealousy and I stroke his head some more, murmuring sweet things to him as I carry him over to our freshly-made bed, the rubbered sheets and soiled linens thankfully already changed. I sigh a little with gratitude, thinking that it's perhaps a little nice to be queen for things like this. And then I sink down against my pillows, taking Rafe with me and waving to my family to come close.

"You have to be nice to sissy, Rafe," I whisper to him as he peers at his father, clearly allowing his curiosity about his baby sister win out over his jealousy. Sinclair sinks down on his side of the bed and moves so that his side is pressed against mine. Henry wheels close, handing Jesse up to Cora as she and Roger likewise move near.

I turn Rafe in my lap so that he can see into Sinclair's arms more completely. Rafe turns his head, peering at his sister like she's a little alien or a completely foreign species, which makes me smile.

"Her name is Ariel," Sinclair whispers to his son, and I look up to my other side when I hear Cora gasp. I grin when I see her pressing her hand to her chest, her eyes squeezed nearly shut with joy.

"Perfect name," she mouths to me, and I laugh and nod eagerly, turning back to my son.

"What do you think, little Rafey?" I murmur, rubbing his back while he leans out to touch his sister. "Will she do?"

Rafe burbles something to Ariel, which makes me smile, but the moment his fingers press against her cheek I give a gasp. Sinclair does too, his eyes whipping up to meet mine.

"Did you feel it too?" I breathe, suddenly very excited.

"I did," he replies, laughing and nodding. Both of us whip our heads back to Rafe, who smiles at his sister for the first time. Ariel squirms a little in her swaddle, smacking her lips and turning her head to the side, clearly getting sleepy.

"Wait, what is it?" Cora asks, leaning over.

"A bond," I say, turning to her and grinning, "just like with Rafe and Jesse."

"Oh," she says, standing up straight and looking down into her arms at her son.

"Cool," Roger breathes, looking between the babies. "What do you think that means?"

"Still in the dark, brother," Sinclair murmurs, peering curiously at Jesse now. "Should we..."

“Is it too much?” I ask, suddenly anxious, looking down at my fresh new baby. “Is it enough to be born and then get a new bond in one day?”

“In this family?” Sinclair asks, his voice dry. “She’s going to have to get used to being overwhelmed.”

I laugh a little, nodding, and then when my mate peers at me, clearly seeking to know what I think, I just shrug – because frankly, I’m curious too, and really what could it hurt?

“Come on,” Sinclair murmurs, placing the sleepy Ariel down on the bed and gesturing for Cora to lay her baby down too. “Let’s...just give it a try.”

So, quite gingerly, Cora lays Jesse down next to his new cousin, whispering a sweet little introduction as she does. As soon as the babies are laid side-by-side, Jesse blinks and frowns for a minute, turning towards Ariel as if he’s quite suddenly noticed that she’s there. And then I burst into a smile to see that he actually reaches for her – seeking her.

The moment his little hand touches her face, it happens again, making me jump a bit this time. The bond SO tiny, so faint! – snaps into place, and my grin deepens.

“Wow,” Sinclair says, shaking his head. “That is amazing. I’ve never heard of anything like that happening before.”

And then all four of us parents laugh as I move to lay Rafe down next to his tiny cousins, careful to place him next to Jesse, who is a bit sturdier. I don’t want my precious little meatball to roll over on my baby girl in her first hours of being alive.

“Someone’s going to have to fill me in here,” Henry murmurs as he alternates between smiling at his three grandchildren and looking curiously between his sons and their mates.

“The kids have bonds, dad,” Sinclair says, smiling up at his father and running an amazed hand through his hair. “Between each other, separate from us, their parents.”

“Really,” Henry says, his eyebrows going up and his face breaking into a smile of pleasure and curiosity. “Well. I mean, I knew they were special children. But I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Have you ever heard of anything like that happening before?” Roger asks, peering down at his dad.

“I have...heard of something like it,” Henry murmurs quietly before looking around at us. “Though it wasn’t between siblings and cousins, and I’m not fully sure it applies.”

“Really,” Sinclair says, looking at his father eagerly, wanting to know more.

Chapter 493 – Three Cousins

Henry nods and looks consideringly at the kids. “Will you let me do a bit of research, son?” he asks, smiling at them, “and get back to you on it? I hate to be cryptic, but I want very much to make sure that I’m right before I send you on a wild goose chase.”

“I think that’s just fine,” I sigh, reaching down and gathering my daughter up into my arms as Rafe rolls over and starts to burble at Jesse, who gives a little squeak of happiness and starts to laugh, reaching to grab at his cousin’s shirt. “I don’t think I have the energy to hear anything new just now.”

“You’re right,” Cora sighs. “We should let you get some rest. But...could I just...”

And I look up to see my sister clutching her hands against her chest, biting her lip, clearly dying to hold the baby but not wanting to make me give her up if I don’t want to.

“Cora!” I laugh, holding Ariel up, “of course you can!”

Cora sighs happily as she gathers Ariel into her arms, murmuring sweet things to her. Of course, she was holding Ariel before – but this time it’s as an aunt, not a doctor. “Hey, sweet baby Ariel,” Cora coos, smiling down at her first niece as tears gather in her eyes. “I’m so excited to meet you!” She leans forward and kisses Ariel on her head. “I’m going to be your favorite,” she whispers.

“No way,” Roger counters, leaning close to study our little girl. “She’s going to be a daddy’s girl, so favorite clearly transfers to nearest uncle.”

Cora just rolls her eyes at him but I smile, loving it to see my family play- fight over who is going to love our daughter the most.

Cora and Roger take a few more minutes with Ariel before passing her to Henry, who rocks her gently as I lean my head against Sinclair.

“She’s very beautiful, Dominic, Ella,” Henry says, looking up at us with moist eyes. “How lucky you are.”

“We are lucky,” Sinclair agrees, leaning forward to scoop Rafe into his arms, as he’s getting a little rambunctious with Jesse. “Little family of four. Sounds familiar, dad?”

Henry grins at Sinclair but Roger just laughs, scooping up his own happy baby. “You know that makes you the girl in that scenario, right little brother?”

“And is that a bad thing?” I ask, raising my eyebrows at my brother-in- law as Henry hands Ariel back into my arms.

Roger laughs and blushes, instantly realizing his mistake.

“All of that ends right now,” I say, pointing my finger at the men in the family. “Ariel is going to have enough trouble growing up as the youngest girl cousin with Rafe and Jesse – I’m not going to tolerate any comments about what she can and can’t do because she’s a girl.”

Roger nods, smiling at me, on board with the plan. Sinclair surprises me, though, by sighing and turning towards the windows. “As progressive as we’d like to be,” he says quietly, “I do wonder how pigeon-holed she’s going to be by dint of being a Princess. The world will enjoy a tomboy Princess for a couple of years, if that’s how Ariel turns out to be, but eventually...I think our dear girl is going to face a lot of expectations regarding pretty smiles and silk dresses and tiaras.”

I sigh and lean closer to him as I realize that he’s right. Our family can only do so much – Ariel’s going to get all sorts of messages about who she’s supposed to be from the rest of the world as well as her family, just like the rest of us.

“We’ll just have to do our very best,” Cora says with a firm nod, and I turn to smile up at her.

“Actually,” Henry says, his voice considering. “Before you take your rest, Ella...”

“Hmm?” I ask, turning towards him, curious.

“Well,” he says, hesitating, looking me up and down and clearly assessing how presentable I am, “they have been waiting out there for hours.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyebrows going up as I turn towards the windows again, realizing that Henry is right. Our people – they’ve been gathered for a long time, hoping for a glimpse of her.

“She just gave birth,” Cora protests, putting her hands out, “Ella should be allowed to rest.”

“No, Henry’s right,” I say, working to sit up and swinging my feet over the edge of the bed. “They’ve all been so nice, wanting to see the baby – ”

“Ella,” Cora hesitates, her voice worried. “As your doctor – ”

“As a magical self-healer,” I say, my voice dry as I get to my feet, “I’m good, Cora, to go step onto the terrace for a moment. Will you help me put on something nice?”

“Something nice?” she gasps, her eyes going wide at the idea.

“Like a nice robe,” I say, rolling my eyes at her and handing the baby off to Sinclair.
“Honestly, this whole thing will take four minutes, and then I’ll be back to bed!”

My sister rolls her eyes at me, clearly objecting to the plan, but three minutes later I’m dressed in a very pretty white robe, my hair neatly tied back, my crown perched on my head honestly as a practical afterthought rather than a serious accessory. My hair is not the neatest it’s ever been, and the crown functions as a very useful headband.

Sinclair passes the baby to me and wraps an arm around my waist, Rafe on his hip as we leave our bedroom. As we walk down the hall with Cora, Roger, Jesse, and Henry following close behind, I frown a bit at Sinclair’s crown and then Rafe’s – which he amazingly consents to wear.

“Ariel’s going to need a crown too,” I murmur, jealous for her sake. “She can have six, if she wants them,” my mate replies, smirking at me a little bit. “But if she’s as much of a tomboy as you’re projecting she’ll be, I don’t know if she’ll wear them.”

“True, ” I sigh, smiling down at my little girl and dropping yet another kiss to her perfect little head. “You be as girly as you want, little Princess,” I murmur to her, and she gives a fussy little scrunch of her face that makes me laugh as she passes sleepy vibes down our bond. “But yes, you’re going to get some pretty crowns. And mama will get more, all matching – ”

“All right,” Sinclair says, his voice dry. “This is starting to get expensive.”

“Don’t get cheap on us now, Sinclair,” I reply, bumping my shoulder into him as we reach the front of the palace, where the crowds are starting to shout. Guards have already started to line the terrace, so they know something is up.

“I would never,” Sinclair sighs, moving his hand from my waist to my shoulder and leaning down to press a quick kiss to my mouth. “Ready?” he asks, looking from me, to Ariel, to Rafe our whole little family.

“Ready,” I say with a nod, reaching out to swipe a quick finger down the length of Rafe’s perfect, chubby little cheek. He squeaks happily and bounces in his dad’s arm, waving at me. I blow him a quick kiss before turning towards the doors.

Sinclair gives a quick glance over his shoulder at his father, and the Duke and the Duchess with their son, and then, smiling, pushes the double doors open. Together, we all step outside.

Chapter 494 – People’s Princess

The crowds go absolutely wild as we walk into the sunlight and a huge smile bursts onto my face. Honestly, it was a little touch-and-go for a few months there, with the media continually debating if I was a good or a bad Queen after the murder on the front steps. But I laid low, and continued doing my best, and things have continually turned towards the people seeing that I only have their best interests at heart, and that I really do want to fight for the little guy.

Plus, I don’t think it hurts that I’m the mother of a super adorable little Prince, and that I’ve just given our nation its first Princess.

The crowd calls her name and I smile out at them, pleased and baffled about how they already know it. I look up at Sinclair, confused, but he just shrugs and smiles down at me.

Together, my little family and I step forward to the edge of the terrace and I boost the baby a little in my arms so that the crowd can see her. They go mad the moment their Princess’s face comes into sight, shouting that she’s beautiful and how glad they are to meet her.

I can’t help but laugh, a few tears coming to my eyes as I see my entire nation feeling precisely the way I do about my little girl. Just so, so thrilled that she’s finally here.

“And you thought Ariel wasn’t going to get as much as a fuss as Rafe,” Cora murmurs with a smirk, coming to my side. The crowd shouts when they see Jesse come forward too – the Little Duke is also a favorite.

“I know,” I laugh, turning to smile at my sister. “Poor Rafe got none of this.”

“But look at him now,” Cora says, leaning forward and pointing to my son. I turn to see my mate smiling down at Rafe, who is actually waving out at the people. I burst into laughter, because it’s so very Rafe. He loves to wave and say hello – he just has no idea that he’s saying hello to the thousands of people gathered on the streets.

Sinclair raise his hand and waves too, but I just smile and hold my baby close, peering down into her face. She scrunches and frowns for a moment before opening her eyes just a little bit, turning towards the noise of her people.

I laugh in delight, because even though I know she can’t see anything, it looks for all things like she’s trying to look and catch sight of them as much as they are of her. I hold her a little higher, murmuring into her ear all the things she could see if her eye were a little bit more developed, but she just gives a little baby sigh and closes her eyes again, pressing her face against me.

I grin but look up at my husband, because I know baby needs to get inside now. Her Princess duties are done and she's hungry and needs some sleep. Sinclair nods to me, leaning forward to kiss me on the forehead, and then we give one last wave to the people before we turn inside.

"Come on, Roger," Cora laughs, and I look over my shoulder to see her tugging him inside.

"No, this is fun," he replies, his voice cheerful. "Give Jesse to me, we're staying out – "

"Ridiculous," she sighs, but I can tell she thinks he's funny. "Did you not get enough attention as a child?"

"Not nearly," Roger sighs dramatically, "Dominic took it all from me when he was born it was very traumatic – "

I grin and look up into Sinclair's face in time to see him roll his eyes, but he doesn't retort, and Henry just laughs behind us.

"You got plenty of attention, Roger," Henry sighs as we head back to our living quarters. "Your mother couldn't get enough of you – thought you were very funny."

"Just like I can't get enough of you," I murmur to our sweet little Ariel, "Or you!" I say, reaching out to ruffle Rafe's hair.

"What about me?" Sinclair asks as we reach our door, smiling at me as he pushes it open.

"Oh, now that you've given me two children, I'm totally done with you," I say, looking up at him with wide earnest eyes, but not completely able to keep a straight face.

"Liar," he laughs, tugging me close to his side with his free hand.

"All right, Ells," Cora says, coming to my side and pressing a kiss to my cheek. "We'll be just down the hall, yes? In case you need me?"

"Thank you, Cora," I say, stepping away from Sinclair's side as he says goodnight to his brother and father. While I don't anticipate that I'll need Cora tonight, it's good to know I've got a doctor and a sister nearby.

She gives me an extra squeeze as I call goodbye to the rest of the Sinclairs and step into the room with my mate and my children. My children. Plural! I laugh in wonder for the joy of it.

“Happy?” Sinclair asks, smiling at me as he presses the door shut.

“Ecstatic,” I sigh, grinning at him before looking to the kids. “But also exhausted. And busy. Do you think you can get Rafe down, or at least distracted, while I get ready to feed Ariel?”

My mate smiles at me, taking a step closer and cupping my chin in his hand. “Did you hear that?” he asks.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“You just said the most beautiful sentence in the world,” he laughs, shaking his head down at me. “Asking me to take care of our son while you got ready to feed our daughter. Our family, Ella – not that it wasn’t before. But it’s growing – which is what we’ve always wanted.”

“I know,” I coo, pressing closer to him and biting my lip as I look up into his gorgeous face, my eyes shining. “You’re right. It’s perfect.”

And my perfect mate smiles at me before dipping down and pressing a kiss to my mouth – so long that I sink into it, losing myself a little. So long that Rafe squeaks in protest, giving Sinclair’s chest a playful smack because he’s bored.

I burst into laughter again and pull away, murmuring my apologies to Rafe as I snatch the crown off his head. “So sorry, prince,” I say, wrinkling my nose at him as he giggles and reaches for the little circlet. “But you’re going to have to get used to sharing mommy and daddy.”

I move into the closet, pulling out a set of newborn pajamas and a sleep sack for Ariel, who I know is going to want a snooze very soon. She gives a few little fussy cries now, clearly hungry and not yet knowing how to communicate that desire down the bond.

“Poor daughter,” I sigh, changing her as fast as I can and then laying her down into Rafe’s old wheeled bassinet as I quickly change into something a little more comfortable and convenient for breastfeeding. “Just a minute, then we’ll get you settled.”

I do my very best to keep my word, making my way out of the closet in record time. I grin when I see that Sinclair is thanking one of the kitchen workers as they make their way out the door, having just delivered a cart full of food.

“Ah, Rafe’s favorite distraction,” I say, smiling at my mate and my son as I move to my nest and settle down in it, Ariel bundled cozily in my arms. “Food!”

“He’s a hungry boy,” Sinclair says, smiling as Rafe does indeed reach for the tray,

almost wiggling out of his dad's arms as he does. "But half of this is for you!"

"Oh!" I say, genuinely surprised, and then I laugh and shake my head at myself, because of course I would forget to eat, so distracted am I by my love for my family. But I lean back against the pillows and tug my shirt up, getting a fussy Ariel ready for her second feeding before I think about feeding myself.

"Yes," Sinclair murmurs, handing Rafe his favorite a slice of apple and wheeling the cart over to me. "I figured you would forget to eat."

"I'm going to be forgetting a lot of stuff over the next week or so," I murmur, relaxing back as Ariel latches and smiling down at her. "You're going to be on overdrive, monitoring the nation as well as me."

"Best duty I ever had," he sighs, getting Rafe set up in the little pop-up highchair that we keep in the corner of the room, moving it close to me and setting some snacks out before him. I turn my head to smile at my son, glad that he's close too.

"Do you think Ariel's going to keep Rafe up all night?" I ask, suddenly curious. "She's going to be up every couple of hours –"

"Ella," Sinclair says, interrupting my train of thought as he sits on the side of the bed and places a hand on my knee. "I want to talk about all of that, of course. But you really, really need to tell me more about what happened when you were visited by the Dark God."

"Oh," I say, looking up at him with a little sadness in my face. Because it's not that it's left my mind precisely – I just...was really enjoying ignoring that and basking in the happiness of this moment.

"I know," he sighs, leaning forward to stroke my face with his palm. "But it's been killing me, my love. Please."

"All right," I reply, nodding, knowing that he needs to hear it all. And so I take a deep breath and launch into the tale.

Chapter 495 – First Night

My mate listens carefully as I tell him, in full detail, everything that happened when the Dark God took me outside of time and gave our little daughter our gift. I mostly look down at her while I tell the story, wondering how this perfect, tiny little angel being could have an ounce of darkness in her.

But even as I wonder that, I consider what the Dark God told me that not everything that is in darkness is bad.

But is that just something he said to distract me, to make me more compliant to accept his “gift?”

Was it, as I suspected, a curse?

“And then I was back,” I say, looking up into Sinclair’s face as he listens closely. “And, obviously, distracted by the insane pain of childbirth.”

A smirk pulls at his lips then, but I can tell that my attempt at humor didn’t go very far towards distracting him. He’s quiet for a long moment, looking towards Rafe but really staring into space as he sorts through his thoughts.

I give him a second to work through it, but I interrupt when I can’t stand it any longer. “So?” I ask quietly. “What do you...think?”

“Well,” Sinclair sighs, turning his attention back to me and to our little girl, who eats hungrily, clearly not having lost her appetite after such a dramatic early encounter. “I certainly wish that the Dark God had simply sent a flower arrangement or a toy. But...I honestly don’t know. We need much more information before we can plan any sort of action.”

“Action?” I ask, a little confused. “What on earth can we do? It’s done, Dominic. Whatever the gift is,” I say, gesturing down at her, “she’s got it.”

“Yes,” Sinclair says, nodding as he sighs and lays himself down a bit on the bed so that he can rest his head against my knee, looking up at my face. “But there’s certainly more we can know. We can ask dad to do some research, see if there’s any precedent for this, if you’re all right with him knowing? And ask Cora to contact your mother, see if she has any insights?”

“Of course Henry can know,” I reply quietly. “And that’s a good idea, with Cora.” I sigh, frustrated with myself for not thinking it first, but Sinclair just sends a pulse of peace down the bond, encouraging me to forgive myself for being scatter-brained on this of all days. I’ve been through a lot, and even though I’m already healed thanks to mom’s gift, I’m still exhausted.

“We’ll work it through, though, Ella,” Sinclair says quietly, reaching his long arm up to tuck my hair behind my ear.

“My instinct still does tell me it’s not all wicked, Dominic,” I say sincerely, looking down into his face. “And with these gods, gut feelings...they tend to be important.”

“I believe you,” he says, his eyebrows going up. “I’d just like all the intel we can get.”

“Me too,” I say, giving him a little smile. But then, even despite my desire to keep pushing on this, my eyelids start to flutter. I blink hard, shaking my head, working to stay up.

“Oh, baby,” Sinclair murmurs, sitting up and leaning in to kiss me on my forehead. “You’re asleep on your feet. Or, well, your ass – but what’s the difference.”

I laugh and shake my head at him. “I need to stay awake till she’s done feeding,” I say with a yawn. “But then, yes, after that...we’re both going to need a nap. Right baby girl?”

Ariel ignores me, of course, continuing to eat. But I grin at her, stroking a hand over her perfect tiny head, loving the way her little fuzz of blonde hair tickles my palm.

“Well, you concentrate on that,” Sinclair says, moving a plate with a simple panini and a bottle of water to the bedside table next to me. “And eat if you can, yes? While you do that, I’ll get Rafe settled.”

I nod, finally starting to feel completely drained as the adrenaline of the day starts to slip from me. I take a lazy bite of my sandwich, barely tasting it as I switch breasts and let Ariel finish up. I’m hardly able to keep my eyes open about fifteen minutes later after Sinclair’s done moving around the room, getting Rafe settled in his playpen with some quiet toys and books and pulling Ariel’s basinet closet to my side.

I give a little squeak of protest when he takes her from my arms, not wanting to let her go, but Sinclair just laughs softly at me and murmurs that she’ll be right here at my side. I take one last peek at Ariel’s face and see that she, like me, is already basically asleep.

And then I yawn, and settle down, and finally completely pass out.

Of course, I barely sleep, because the baby gets me up every couple of hours needing to be fed again. The next day passes pretty much in a blur, with me catching sleep when I can and attending to Ariel when she needs it. I’m not in a total fog the whole time – I still spend time with my son and talk to my mate and admire my baby – but most of the time? Most of the time Ariel and I sleep.

Sinclair is a dream throughout that first crucial night, taking complete charge of my baby boy and allowing Ariel and I the space we need to get used to our new patterns. He spends time with her as well, of course, holding and talking to her while she's awake and not eating, but I can tell that he's exhausted too.

Not as exhausted as me – I definitely get to keep that title. But that first night – it's not precisely easy on dads either, is it? Especially when you've got another little one, barely over a year old.

Which is why I'm surprised, frankly, when Cora, and Roger, and Jesse, and Henry all come trooping in the evening after Ariel was born.

"Oh!" I say, blinking at them and laughing, pleased. "Did – did I know you were coming?"

"Oh my god," Sinclair says, turning to me and cocking his head to the side. "Did I did I seriously forget to tell you?"

I burst into laughter as he slaps a hand to his face, and Roger and Henry join in.

"Always a rare pleasure to see you mess up, brother," Roger says, wrapping an arm around his brother's shoulders and giving him a squeeze. 66 Though I guess you're forgiven for this one that first night is... a lot."

"It certainly is," Henry says, accepting a hug from his son as Cora comes over to give me a kiss, a perky Jesse sitting up in her arms and babbling with excitement as he looks around the room.

"Hey Cora," I say, grinning at her. "Hey, chatty!" I laugh, poking Jesse in the belly, Ariel in my arms. Rafe totters over and wraps an arm around her leg, smiling and reaching up for her or for Jesse – it's not precisely clear which.

The greetings finished, I look around curiously at my family. "So, what did I miss?" I ask. "Why are we all here?"

"To talk about your new weird God encounter," Roger says, grinning at me. "And our kids' weird bond. Life's been so fun since you joined the family, Ella – seriously, I don't think I express my gratitude enough."

"Always happy to keep it spicy, precisely for you, Roger," I say, giving him a wink as I pull the covers of my nest aside, getting to my feet with Ariel cozy in my arms. Roger grins and gives me a nod. "Do we have...new information or something?" I ask, pushing my hair back over my shoulders.

"We do," Henry says, nodding to me. "Shall we go into the living room, where there's

room for us all to sit? It's none of it bad news, but I think it would be best for us to have a chat."

Anxiety rolls in me as I nod and gesture towards the door to the living room, looking to Sinclair with my apprehension pulsing down our bond.

"He's not placating you," Sinclair says, coming close to kiss me on the cheek and grab Rafe off of Cora's leg, tossing him into the air as we make our way to the living room with our family. Rafe squeals with joy and I can't help grinning at him. My little boy – already such a thrill seeker.

"All right," I sigh, holding baby Ariel close to my chest as I follow my family through the door and shut it behind me. Then I curl up on my favorite place on the couch, Dominic in the corner behind me, and turn my attention to Henry.

Because he, I'm coming to realize, has been up all night as well gathering information. And he wouldn't be here if he wasn't ready to share.

Chapter 496 – Bonded Power

I give Ariel one last kiss for luck and exhale a deep breath, focusing my eyes on Henry as I lean back against my mate, who wraps a supportive arm around me.

“Actually, Ella,” Cora says, and my eyes dart to her. She smiles and me from across the couch, her arms wrapped around her baby on her lap. “I’m the one who has news first.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyes going wide as I shift a little to direct my attention to her now. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know – ”

She shakes her head, dismissing my apology as Roger comes to perch on the arm of the couch behind her. She reaches up a hand and he takes it, giving her a little squeeze.

“Um, we contacted mom this morning,” she says quietly, apology all over her face. “To... to ask about what the Dark God could have possibly been up to. I’m sorry we did it without you – I know you would have wanted to be there -”

“No,” I breathe, even though I am a little disappointed. “I mean, I wouldn’t have been able to see her anyway, right?”

“Yeah,” she says, cocking her head to the side. “Unless we go to the temple, it is sort of a...one-on-one experience, isn’t it?”

“But we can go,” Sinclair murmurs behind me, supportive, “if we don’t get the answers you need – ”

“It’s okay,” I say, nodding to everyone around the room. “I get it – you don’t need to be so gentle with me. I was completely knocked out from giving birth and we needed information fast. It’s okay. So...” I flick my fingers at my sister, smiling at her. “Please, divulge. I’m dying to know.”

“Well,” Cora says, laughing a little and glancing up at Roger. “Mom was not happy to hear that her boyfriend visited you.”

“Really?” I gasp, a little delighted at the immortal gossip.

“Really,” Cora confirms, her eyes going wide as a grin overtakes her face. “She figured that he knew about you, but she had no idea that he’d go so far as to bestow a gift on the baby behind her back.”

“Behind her back,” I repeat, shaking my head. “Wow. So? Did she say it was... dangerous?”

“She said that he didn’t have the balls to go that far,” Cora says, laughing and giving a

little shrug. “Or, well, those weren’t her precise words – but that was the sentiment. That he’s just trying to get her attention and let her know that he’s pissed – but that he knows better than to truly mess with her lineage.”

“So,” I say, looking down at little Ariel who lays cuddled in my arms, drowsy but idly kicking her little feet. “It really was a gift?”

“Mom doesn’t know what it was,” Cora says, shaking her head. “But she... she said she can’t make him take it back, Ells. That immortal gifts they’re not like...presents you can return or regift. They become part of us.”

“That makes sense,” I sigh, hoisting my baby up closer. “Well, at least we know it’s not... bad.”

“Which doesn’t mean it’s good,” Sinclair grumbles behind me. Clearly, he wanted better news.

“There is some precedence,” Henry says, leaning forward in his chair and studying the baby as best he can. “The texts are old, but there are some that report on gifts given by both the Goddess and the Dark Lord. What is interesting is that they seem to be reliable – there is one text in particular that speaks of a Goddess-given gift of healing that sounds quite a bit like yours, Ella,” he says, raising his eyebrows at me.

“Oh,” I say, perking up a little. “Well, that’s interesting. Would I be able to read that?”

“I’ll have it translated,” Henry says nodding, “and sent to you as soon as possible.”

“And what were some of the ‘gifts’ the Dark God has given?” Sinclair asks, his voice heavy and dubious on the word “gift.”

“He doesn’t give everyday gifts like the Goddess does – her interests have always been more domestic, for lack of a better word. She deals with the heart and the home – assigning mates, healing the body, changing the weather to ensure good crops.” He nods to Cora and I as he lists our gifts and I turn my head, because he’s right – while Cora and I have used them in much different ways, they do seem to be gifts that could be used to build a family and keep it safe in hard times.

“And the dark god?” Sinclair presses, his voice a little annoyed in his anxiety now.

“He,” Henry says, shifting his eyes to his son now, “prefers...more sweeping magics. Not things that can or should be used every day. Things that...change the world.”

A shiver runs through me at this and I find myself holding my breath as I look down at my little girl.

“Change the world?” Sinclair asks, going tense behind me.

“The text reports that he once gave a man the gift of eclipse, allowing him to hold the moon’s shadow before the sun for days on end, only relenting when his enemies collapsed to his demands.”

We all go silent and still at this.

After a long moment, only Roger is bold enough to break the quiet of the room.

“What the hell, Ariel,” he breathes, leaning forward to stare at his niece.

A ridiculous little laugh bursts at me from this, and I shake my head as Cora and Sinclair and then Henry start to laugh as well. I shake my head at my brother-in-law, so grateful for him and his strange sense of humor, which revealed itself so late in the game.

“Seriously,” Roger says, sitting up straight and running his hand through his hair, looking at his niece with wide eyes. “She’s the littlest of all of us but it sounds like she’s going to have some serious power.”

“Well, we don’t know it’s going to be something like that,” I sigh, rolling my eyes and trying to shake the tension out of my shoulders. “It could be... something smaller. Maybe he’s just trying to get under mom’s skin.”

“Or up her skirt,” Roger murmurs, and I grin as Cora turns to smack him for speaking such blasphemy about our mother and a deity. Roger just wrinkles his nose at Cora as he grins and grabs his arm where she hit him, pretending that the blow stung when it clearly did not.

“So, Ariel is clearly the most powerful wolf amongst us,” I say with a sigh, propping her up a little in my arms so she can look around at the family. “So, she is the Alpha now.” Ariel, betraying my confidence, just gives a sleepy little mew, her eyelids fluttering shut as she snuggles back into my arm.

Cora laughs and I feel a little pulse of pride and pleasure down my bond with Sinclair.

“At least it means she’ll be able to stand up to her brother and her cousin,” Roger says, looking between the boys – Rafe toddling around on the floor and Jesse in Cora’s arms. “Though ...none of them are very impressive just yet.”

“Do you think?” I ask, looking around at the group. “Does it...I mean, they all have gifts from mom, right? But will her being strong make the boys strong – through their bonds or something?”

"I don't know," Henry says, tilting his head and considering his grandchildren with interest.

"But," Sinclair says, clearly thinking it through as he talks, "that's not how bonds work, right? I mean, Cora and Ella are blessed with Goddess gifts, but Roger and I aren't any stronger for it."

I click my tongue, offended, and turn to glare at my mate over my shoulder. "Excuse me, Dominic, but you have benefited many times from my gift –"

"Yes, darling," he says, rolling his eyes a little and shaking his head, "but you know what I mean. We aren't physically stronger, or gifted ourselves."

"True," Cora says, looking between the two of them. "But...both of us did bond to extremely powerful Alpha wolves who just happen to be brothers "Baby," Roger says, interrupting and beaming down at her, pressing a hand to his heart. "That is...the nicest thing you've ever said to me -"

"It's just a fact, Roger," she sighs, rolling her eyes, making me laugh.

"You think I'm powerful, and tough," he whispers, sliding down the couch's arm to squeeze in behind her, wrapping his arms around her and Jesse both, rocking them back and forth. Jesse squeaks and laughs as Cora tries to hold her own laughter back. "You're amazed with me

"Oh god," she sighs, even though her grin. "I take it back –"

"Never, I'll treasure this moment my whole life –"

I'm shaking with laughter even as Sinclair raises his voice to cut through it.

"As amazing as this breakthrough is for the two of you," he says, his voice not without humor, "what's your point, Cora?"

"I don't know," she sighs, leaning contentedly back against Roger, who sweetly presses a kiss to her neck. "Just that perhaps there's more to these bonds than just raw power being passed between them. I mean, I don't think it's really a chance that Ella and I figured out we're sisters and ended up with brothers. We're...kind of a powerful foursome, when we put our minds to it."

I nod, considering that maybe Cora is right. That perhaps it's less about the bonds themselves and instead what they create in combination.

“And those three,” Cora continues, gesturing between the children, “they’re already bonded to each other, each with a goddess gift. And then Ariel with a Dark gift as well?” She shrugs. “I think, in combination, they could be... formidable.”

“Future of our nation, right here,” I say quietly, leaning to again kiss my little girl and reach out a hand to my son, who I suddenly want quite close. “Whatever gifts they have, I hope they can be convinced to use them to protect themselves first, and then our people after that.”

Quietly, my family nods as we look around at each other. Because our family comes first – but our nation?

These children are going to have a huge role in it. I hold my breath a little, praying inwardly that we can raise them to be strong enough to use their gifts for good.

“Actually,” Henry says, making us all turn to him in surprise. “There’s some precedence there as well.”

And my eyebrows nearly shoot into my hairline. More news today?

I settle back against my mate, ready again to listen.

Chapter 497 – Family Lines

Ella

Henry takes a deep breath then, looking between the children. “I have been very intrigued,” he begins, “by the idea that the children have bonds with each other – bonds like that between siblings and cousins, it’s unusual. Indeed, I thought it was unique, but it is not.”

My brows go up as I listen with interest.

“The children have created between them...something of a triangle,” Henry murmurs, looking between the three of them. “There have been rare examples of individuals having multiple fated mating bonds – my son, interestingly amongst them – ”

I lean back against my mate, who wraps his arm more tightly around me.

“But this,” Henry says, gesturing between Ariel, Rafe, and Jesse, “three people bonded together naturally, each to the other two.” He shakes his head. “I have not yet found any examples of it happening naturally. Though there are those who have...forged such connections.”

“Really?” Roger asks, his eyebrows going up.

“Usually in religious ceremonies,” Henry says, folding his hands in his lap and looking around at us, “in the wilds of the north. Two people already bonded – either by fate or by choice, usually through a mating – would each either willingly or by obligation magically forge a bond with a third.”

“For what reason,” Cora asks, shaking her head. “Like...plural marriage? Or something?”

“No,” Henry replies, shaking his head at her. “This is usually done in communities where those who undergo the ceremony have long taken vows of chastity. No, they do it for the power that results from the bond, which is said to be...unique.”

“This is so weird,” I murmur, looking down at my kids. I mean, I’m very aware that my children and my nephew are special, but...

“The magics of the north are strange,” Henry says on a sigh, shaking his head and giving a shrug. “They are also closed-mouthed regarding what the results of such bonding actually are. But I do imagine it’s closer to the kinds of powers wielded by the dark priests we spent so much of our time defying last year. Spells cast at a price, rather than goddess-given gifts freely used with little effort.”

“But since the bond between the kids was...natural,” Sinclair murmurs, speaking his thoughts aloud, “can we assume that whatever power results from them would...be easier to wield?”

“I have no idea,” Henry says on a sigh, smiling down at his grandsons and granddaughter again. “Though I hope for their sake that it is. Those forged bonds and the resulting magic – they didn’t come without a price.”

“Oh geeze,” I murmur, sighing and looking down at my precious new baby. She can barely stay awake, let alone wield great and powerful magics. “What are you going to get up to, little girl?”

“All sorts of good things,” Sinclair murmurs to me, though I can hear the worry on in his voice.

“I’m sorry I don’t have more definitive answers,” Henry says on a sigh, his face truly apologetic.

“That’s all right, dad,” Roger says, smiling at him. “It’s more than we knew before. Besides – these kids, they’re going to have to learn how to figure it out.”

“And the Goddess said to trust them,” Cora says, shrugging and standing, hoisting Jesse in her arms and smiling at him. “So, I’m just going to let them worry about it.”

I grin at my sister, realizing that this honestly is probably the best method. I mean we’re moms, there’s definitely no way we’re not going to worry. But what can we do? Cora and Roger are right – we just have to raise them well, and trust them to figure it out.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” I ask, sitting up straight as I see Roger get to his feet as well. “Don’t, stay! We can get food!” But I yawn even as I finish my sentence.

“We’re leaving,” Cora says, with a gentle smile, “because Jesse needs a nap, and so do you. And lil miss Princess over there is already asleep.”

I look down in my arms and realize that Cora’s right – Ariel’s drifted off without me noticing.

“Oh shoot,” I mutter. “I wanted to feed her...”

“We’ll leave you to it,” Cora says, leaning down and kissing me on the cheek. “I’m just a phone call away anything you need, sis.”

“Thanks, Cor,” I murmur, smiling at her and giving Roger a hug as well when he dips down to say goodbye to the baby. I wave to them as they pass out the door, Henry

looking after them as they go.

“Will you stay at least, Henry?” I ask, leaning back against Sinclair.

“I’m afraid I should take my leave too,” he says as Rafe pushes to his feet and totters over him, reaching out his chubby arms and begging to be picked up. Henry laughs and obliges, lifting my little meatball into his lap. “That is, if this one will let me.”

“If he just sits on you,” I say dryly, “you’ll be too heavy to roll out of here.”

“A fate I will happily accept,” Henry murmurs, turning Rafe on his lap and hugging him close, pressing his cheek to Rafe’s dark hair. “He is so like his father at this age. It’s like having my little boy back.”

My heart fills to hear Henry talk about Rafe that way, and I feel Sinclair’s own swell of emotion down our bond.

“That one, though,” Henry says, looking over at Ariel asleep in my arms. “She is very precious to me as well, because she is so unfamiliar.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, tilting my head in curiosity.

“I never had a daughter,” he sighs, staring at my little girl with her little fuzz of golden-white hair. Then he flicks his eyes to Sinclair. “Your mother and I tried for another – she wanted a little girl very badly, you know. But the Goddess decided that two was enough.”

“I didn’t know that,” Sinclair says, his voice a little thick with his emotion.

“Yes,” Henry says, raising his eyebrows as his gaze again falls to Ariel. “So, this one is the fulfilment of a wish made long ago for a little girl Sinclair. I always wondered what she looked like.”

I clench my teeth against the pricking of tears against my eyes, not wanting Henry to think that I’m sad or that I pity him. It’s just – I never knew he wanted that, never knew my sweet daughter would mean so much to him.

“Do you know,” Henry says, cocking his head, and I lean forward, listening intently. “I never thought she’d be a blonde.”

I burst into laughter at this, and so does my mate, and I wipe away the little tears that spill out from my eyes. “Well, we don’t know if she’s going to stay blonde,” I say, grinning and shaking my head. “Her hair could get darker -”

“No, Ella,” Henry says, raising his eyes to me. “It is clear that this one is your daughter.

She'll have her mother's beauty, which includes your unique hair. She's a Sinclair in name... but she's her mother born again."

"She's got to have some part of me," Sinclair murmurs, a little jealous, leaning forward to peer at her.

"Time will tell," Henry says, leaning back in his chair. Rafe bumbles something, looking up at his grandfather, who grins down at him and runs a hand over his head. "Either way, I am very glad to be their grandfather. I'm so pleased I'll get to see them grow, Goddess willing."

I nod, agreeing to the sentiment, thinking that the children are lucky to have such an eager and dedicated grandfather.

"I do wish," Henry says, I think a little lost in his thoughts now, "that I were more able to play with them – could participate more in helping you raise them by getting down on the floor, running, walking. But," he shrugs, "when the children are big enough to stand on the back of the chair, at least they'll always have someone to cart them around -"

"Oh my god," I say, the words spilling out of my mouth. "Oh my god," I sit up straight, staring at Henry, my eyes flicking to his legs – because honestly, I don't even notice his chair anymore, or think of him at all as someone whose abilities are hindered.

Or of me as someone who is able to do anything about it.

Henry looks at me, his eyebrows going up in surprise as I hastily – but carefully pass Ariel into Sinclair's arms, my mate looking at me curiously too.

"Henry," I breathe, reaching for him, taking his hand. "Why didn't you say anything sooner? Why didn't – I'm so sorry – why didn't I think of it – "

"What are you talking about, Ella?" he asks, frowning at me a little. Even Rafe gives a curious little squeak.

"I'm so stupid," I say, closing my eyes, frantically seeking my gift. "If I can heal you, why didn't anyone -"

"Oh, Ella," Henry says, drawing his hand out of mine. Shocked, I open my eyes, looking into his own. "Ella, my dear, I don't think it works like that."

"What?" I ask, surprised.

"I don't think your gift can heal what has already healed," he says, shaking his head at me. "A disability like this – it is not an injury. Your gift, from what I've learned from your

using it, heals what is wrong with my body. But what happened to me so long ago – I've healed from it. My body is just different now – I'm not sick."

"Oh," I say, the logic of that hitting me like a slap in the face. I bite my lip though, dropping my eyes. "Well, would you let me try?"

"Of course, my dear," he murmurs, giving me back his hand.

And so I close my eyes, and access my gift, and breathe softly as it sweeps through Henry. It knits up a few little things that I think are natural with age, but as it moves through him...

He's right.

There's nothing sick or injured about Henry's legs or his spine. The wounds they healed long ago – perhaps not in the way we would have liked but...his body already did the work my gift would have done, as best it could.

Disappointment must be all over my face, because when I open my eyes Henry clucks his tongue and moves his chair closer, cupping my cheek in his palm. "Thank you for wanting to try, Ella. But really – I am not unhappy with my life in this chair. I am a blessed man and as much as I would have liked to run with my grandchildren... well, I'm a bit old for that anymore anyway, aren't I?"

"You are not," I say, scrunching my nose at him.

"Well," Henry laughs, grinning at me as Sinclair sits forward, pressing himself close to my side. "At least I can roll with them, which is probably just as good."

I smile at him, nodding and leaning back to rest my head on Sinclair's shoulder as I do.

"You're going to be the best grandfather, Henry," I say, sighing a little as I smile at him. "They're lucky to have you."

"And I them," he says, grinning down at Rafe and giving my son a wink. "

What do you think, little boy? Should we roll to the kitchens? Get a snack?"

In response to his fifth favorite word – only behind Mama, Papa, Jesse, and breakfast – Rafe's little face lights up and he throws his hands in the air, giving an excited squeak. We all laugh and Henry raises an eyebrow at us. When Sinclair nods his assent, Rafe and his grandfather roll away, off on a little adventure.

And I lean back against my mate, holding my lucky little girl tight in my arms.

Chapter 498 – Baptizing the Princess

Ella

Three weeks later – Ariel was born under a waning quarter moon, not a new moon like her brother and her cousin – I stand anxiously in the woods, my little girl held tight in my arms.

“I’m sensing some anxiety,” Cora says, grinning at me with a little too much glee as she comes up to my side, dressed in a gorgeous silver gown, Jesse awake and interested on her hip.

“I wasn’t anxious like this when Rafe went in,” I sigh, reaching out to touch Jesse’s nose with my fingertip, making him giggle. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I was anxious – but it’s this one’s complicated little portent that has me all worked up.”

“I know,” Cora says, wrinkling her nose at me wickedly. “I can’t wait – the payback is real-”

“Don’t you dare,” I say, glaring at her and pointing a finger at her. “You’re trying to deliberately jinx my daughter just because your Jesse has some weird shadow magic coming his way – ”

“I would never!” Cora says, laughing and swatting my finger away. “I just like teasing you, Ella. Hear that, Ariel?” she says, leaning over to grin at her goddaughter. “I hope that your future comes out nice and safe and boring, for your mother’s sake.”

“Oh, hold your tongue,” I mutter, scowling and moving Ariel away from her aunt. “I don’t want her life to be boring, I just want...” I sigh, looking down at the little girl who has my whole heart. “I just want it all to be very good, and for her to be safe...but also to have some adventures along the way.”

“A big ask,” Sinclair says, ambling over to my side with a glass of champagne in one hand, Rafe perched on his hip. “Especially for a little girl named Baby Trouble.”

I grin when I hear the nickname, considering that...well, it’s a little bit true, even if the name so far has been a bit of a joke.

Honestly, we’ve called her Ariel very little she’s baby trouble, most of the time. Or Princess Trouble. Or Princess Baby Bubble Trouble. Or whatever combination thereof inspires us at the moment. And, well, she hasn’t really lived up to it – not yet. Rafe – he was a tough newborn, at least for the first two weeks. But Ariel?

God, she’s been a little bit of a dream.

I can only hope that her nickname continues to be ironic for the rest of her days, but I know that's too much to hope for.

Rafe eagerly leans forward from his father's hip, reaching for his sister, spitting out an excited series of syllables that all start with "ba!"

"You like your sister, little guy?" Cora says, laughing and putting a hand on Rafe's chest to keep him from excitedly spilling out of his father's arms.

"We think he's trying to say baby," I say, grinning at my boy, pleasure and pride filling me from head to toe. I mean – I know every mom is proud of her children. But Rafe – he really is such a sweet baby and a clever boy, always wanting to be close to me, close to Ariel.

And his dad too, of course but Rafe and me? We've really got a special bond.

"All right," Roger says, his own baby on his arm and glass of champagne in his hand, just like his brother. "Almost time! Are we ready to do this?"

"Don't talk about it like a sports match, Roger," I say, raising my chin at him jokingly. "It's a sacred ritual. Please act with the gravity it deserves."

"It's our third one, Ella," Roger says, playfully rolling his eyes at me. "It's getting old – "

"You're fated to be the father of like six kids, Roger," I say, rolling my eyes at him right back. "Tell me that when we get to your sixth baptism – "

"At that point we're just going to wander into the back yard in our pajamas," he murmurs, nodding first towards the baby in my arms and then to Cora, silently indicating that I should hand her over. "We're going to drink beer and hold the baby out to the moon on a dish towel, use a plastic baby pool instead of the sacred pond -"

"We are not," Cora scoffs, gently taking Ariel into her arms as Sinclair and I laugh. Roger grins, leaning forward to kiss me on the cheek before passing Jesse to me.

"You know I'm kidding, right, Ells?" he whispers.

I smile at my brother-in-law and gently pat his cheek. "When in doubt, Roger," I sigh, "I always assume you're kidding."

"This is why you're my favorite sister-in-law," he says, ruffling Jesse's hair before turning towards the Goddess' priestess, who begins to call everyone to order. "Now, let's get this party started!"

Cora

I smile down at my perfect little niece, who is looking around the dark forest with interest. “Ready to meet your granny, little girl?” I whisper to her, holding her close and kissing her forehead. “She’s excited to meet you, she told me so.”

Ariel gives a little squeak, which sounds so much like a response that it makes me laugh.

Roger laughs too, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Remember the last time we were out here?” he murmurs, and I look up at him.

“Yup,” I say, grinning. “We fought the whole time. I was completely ready to shove you into that pond.”

“Oh, right back at you,” he says, nodding fervently. “It was either that, or grab you and kiss you – I didn’t know which I wanted more. Maybe both shove you into the pond, dive in after you, grab you, kiss you until we both drowned...”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Well, we know which one you settled on, in the end.”

“Well you were crying so much,” he says, rolling his eyes in pretend exhaustion, “I didn’t know how else to get you to stop -”

“Oh, you idiot,” I sigh, laughing and stopping for a second, wrapping my hand around the lapel of his suit jacket and pulling him to me. “Can’t you just for once say something nice?”

“What do you want to hear, Cora?” he asks, smirking down at me and taking my face between his hands. “That it was the happiest moment of my life to that point? That I’d been waiting to kiss you for months, and that afterwards I had to actively stop myself from grabbing you and kissing you every time you walked into a room?”

My smile grows. “Something like that,” I murmur, and I tug on his coat just a little, pulling him down for our second kiss in this forest – which is just as good as the first.

“I love you so much, Cora,” he sighs when he pulls away, his eyelids heavy as he stares down into my face.

“I love you too, Roger,” I say, smiling up at him, passing every ounce of love I feel down our bond so he knows I mean it. Because we tease – but god, do I love this man.

Roger leans in for another kiss, but a silver light flares at the edge of my vision.

“Oh,” I say, my eyebrows going up as I adjust the baby in my arms and turn towards the light. “I think mom is getting impatient.”

“Well then,” Roger says, his arm still around my shoulder, “let’s not keep the Goddess waiting.”

So together, my mate and I carry our little goddaughter forward to the edge of the pool that forms through the trees. I smile to see that this one is different surrounded by rocks this time, a tiny waterfall splashing into it at the edge. Secretive and peaceful, like a hidden hot spring.

Roger nods to me and I step forward, holding unwrapping the baby and holding her out into the moonlight that floods into the grove from above. And then he and I say the sacred words, dedicating our sweet Ariel to her grandmother the Goddess, pledging to love and protect her all our lives.

The moonlight grows brighter as we speak, and I feel a warmth and contentment fill me that I know comes from my mother, who is truly pleased with her granddaughter.

When the words are done, our attention shifts, because – as it did before – the premonition starts to take shape in the air above the water. And as we watch, Roger and my eyes go wide.

Chapter 499 – A Story to Come

Cora

The images of Ariel's future come in quick flashes, and somehow I get the impression that the Goddess is eager to share these glimpses of her life.

The ones that come first are what I sort of expected, especially after seeing some images of Rafe's childhood and hearing about the ones that Ella and Sinclair saw during Jesse's baptism. But these ones focus on an angelic little girl with rose-gold hair who is just... ridiculously happy.

My ears fill almost instantly with tears to see her running and playing with the boys who are so clearly Rafe and Jesse. Ariel – she's always at the center of their games, always laughing so heartily her eyes are barely open above her rosy cheeks. In one flash, Jesse's climbed up onto the branch of a tree and is reaching a hand down for her as Rafe boosts her up from below. In another, Ariel is cuddled between her brother and her cousin, all wrapped up in a big blanket as the three sit around a campfire, their eyes wide and bright as they roast marshmallows and look with awe up at Roger, who is clearly in the midst of telling a scary story.

Roger laughs beside me at the sight and I press myself close to them as we get more insight into her life as she grows older, her teenager years as she becomes the Nation's princess, as she grows into a beautiful, graceful young woman but still one full of pranks, running through the halls of the palace with her brother and Jesse chasing behind.

And then I gasp, a little, to see our little girl dressed as a bride –

My hand goes to my mouth- because she looks so young and so afraid –

My stomach drops when I see her what looks like a moment later, her back pressed to a door as she sobs in her wedding gown as two young men who are so clearly my son and my nephew jump to her side.

The images move faster than I can truly process them next, but my hand falls from my mouth, and my jaw drops in awe as I realize that

That she didn't get married after all, but instead that she ran, that she's...

She's with Jesse and Rafe, as they attend some kind of military school dressed up in fatigues, her hair tucked up beneath a cap, looking for anything like...like a boy...

"Oh my god," I mutter, and then I laugh because it just gets stranger after that-

Ariel, mixing potions in a chemistry class, her eyes going wide as one goes awry and

explodes in front of her –

Ariel, an expert sniper, crouching on top of a tower and hitting the bullseye of a target that must be half a mile away

Ariel, curled up in a chair by the fire, sitting in the lap of a very handsome young man whose jaw could cut glass and whose adorable dimples are

And joy swells in me, because I know it instantly, that that boy – he's her mate

But then I gasp again because the image changes – and Ariel is looking up at another young man powerfully built, scowling down at her in some hallway made of stone, but she shoves him, hard, and whips a finger up to point in his face, a defiant snarl on her lips, looking so much like her mother –

And even as a shocked little laugh spills from my mouth, anxiety twists in my stomach, because I know...

I know just as much as I did with the first boy, that this one – he's her mate too.

I can't help it then, I look down at my little baby niece, who burbles and looks up at the moon –

Two fated mates, just like her father...

And suddenly, what the Goddess said to me in my living room that day so many months ago...

It makes...so much sense.

My eyes move back to the images, which fly by even faster now – too swift to catch them all – and I see of our children training hard, laughing together, working to build their lives and help each other and serve our nation –

The last image, though, lingers.

Ariel, with Rafe and Jesse on either side as they always are and her two mates behind her. All standing together on a battlefield with Ariel at the center, magic welling between her hands and passing to her brother, to her cousin.

Their faces are serious as they look at something gathering above them some force I cannot see.

And then...

The image disperses. It disappears.

Roger and I stay still for a long moment, and I'm only shaken out of it by a little mewling cry from Ariel's tiny mouth.

"Poor baby, you must be cold," I murmur, pulling her close and wrapping her up in her blanket. Ariel tucks her little head against me, closing her eyes and opening her mouth in a wide yawn.

"Wow," Roger murmurs as he stares down at our niece. "Wow, I was not expecting that..."

I laugh a little, looking up at him and shaking my head. "Neither was I."

"Damn, Ariel," he says, laughing and running a shocked hand through his hair. "Looks like you've got one hell of a story to tell."

"Come on, baby," I say, laughing and shaking my head at her. "Let's go tell your mom... only the things she absolutely needs to know."

"Really?" Roger asks, raising his eyebrows at me.

"What are aunties for?" I say, shrugging and smirking at him. "A girl's got to have someone to keep her secrets."

He laughs, wrapping an arm around me as we turn back. But before we go I cast one more look over my shoulder, smiling up at the moon and sending a mental thank-you to my mother for her gift, for this glimpse of the future.

And the moonlight flares, just once, and I smile. Because I know she heard.

Ella

"Oh, they're back, they're back!" I gasp, shoving my half-drunk glass of champagne onto a table and rushing forward when I see Cora and Roger emerging from the dark of the woods with Ariel sleeping in Cora's arms. Our gathered family and friends shout a cheer, welcoming them back.

Cora smiles at me, her expression warm and rich as I hurry to her.

"Tell me everything," I gasp, taking my baby back and cooing to her as I rest her little head in the crook of my elbow, gazing down at her perfect, sleeping face.

“Well wait for me,” Sinclair says, laughing as he comes to join our little circle with Jesse on one hip and Rafe on the other. “Honestly, Ella, I’m her parent too – ”

“You should have been faster then,” I say, rolling my eyes at him.

“I’m carrying two kids – ”

But I just ignore him and turning back to Cora. “Go! Spill!”

“I don’t know, Ells,” she says, smiling at me and reaching to take Jesse from Sinclair. “Honestly, as a mother? I’m not sure you want to know.”

My face goes pale with shock and terror and Roger scowls at his mate.

“Cora, don’t say it like that,” he says, giving her a half-hearted glare before reaching out a hand and placing it on my shoulder. “Seriously, Ella, it was all fine – there’s nothing bad. I mean, both Jesse and Rafe showed us that there’s a war coming – and that affects Ariel’s life, as it will all of ours. But seriously – all good news from the Goddess. She’s going to have an incredible life.”

“Really?” I gasp, holding my daughter tight, and looking between my sister and her mate. “You wouldn’t lie to me? It’s really all okay?”

“It is,” Cora says, laughing and reaching out to gently touch my cheek.

I exhale a huge sigh of relief, looking down at my little girl. “You had me scared, baby trouble,” I murmur, tracing a finger over her soft little cheek. But then my mind traces back to what Cora said. “Wait,” I say, my head whipping back up. “What wouldn’t I want to know as a mother!?”

“I mean, I’ll tell you sis – but aren’t there some things a mom should be in the dark about?” Cora asks.

I tilt my head back and groan, honestly not knowing. “I don’t know, Cora – are there!?”

She laughs and I look first at Sinclair, who shrugs, and then back at my sister.

“Come on,” Roger says, nodding at the crowds of people waiting to congratulate us and at the small table of refreshments. “Let’s decide this over some champagne.”

Sinclair nods at me and I sigh, moving with my family and pondering my choices as we accept the congratulations of our friends and let Henry hold the baby for a while, filling him in on the good omens that the Goddess has given us about her future.

“All right,” I say, sidling up to Cora, my eyes on the baby in her grandfather’s arms. “If you think it’s going to stress me out...don’t tell me. But...give me a hint. Is it...like, illness? Or is she lonely? Oh, I really don’t want her to be lonely. Or -”

“It’s none of that, Ella,” Cora says, her eyes sparkling as she smiles at me. “She’s a really happy kid, and her early life she really loves it. She and Jesse and Rafe are all best friends and they stay together through their twenties, at least.”

“So,” I say, cocking my head and studying her. “What...”

“Let’s just say,” Cora says, her grin widening, “that your little girl? Her love life is... tumultuous.”

“Oh my god,” I groan, but I’m laughing as I cover my face with my hands and tilt it back to the sky. Because that? A little heartbreak, a little drama? I mean, Cora’s right – I’m not sure I want to know the details. But that I can handle.

As I pull my hands away from my face, I look upwards through the trees where the moon peeks through the leaves. “Oh mom,” I say, shaking my head a little. “What do you have in store for my little girl?”

“A lot,” Cora says, laughing and sipping at her champagne, Jesse leaning his sleepy head against her shoulder.

“So...” I say, stepping close and whispering – not really wanting Sinclair to hear because something in me tells me that this Alpha dad is not ready to hear about his three-week-old daughter’s future love life – “is she... did you see? Does she have a mate?”

Cora’s smile is bright, but a little wicked. I turn my head, curious. “Yes, Ella,” she says, nodding happily, “your little girl...she’s mated.”

I give a little squeak of joy, my face bursting into a grin as I step closer. “Is he...is he cute?!”

“Really cute,” Cora says, stepping close to share the secret and wrinkling her nose as she dishes. “Like really cute, Ella – big time – ”

I squeak again, turning in a happy little circle. “So, did you get to see...I mean, like a timeline for when she meets him!?”

Cora just shakes her head, though. “I don’t think I should say anymore,” she says, giving a shrug. “I mean, I will if you want me to, Ella, but...” she turns her smile now on our little girl. “I think ...maybe just let her live her life. Don’t you want to be surprised?”

“Yes,” I sigh, leaning against my sister’s other shoulder with a scowl, even though happiness races through me. “I hate it when you’re all wise.”

“It’s the burden I bear,” she sighs, resting her head against mine. “Because if you don’t know, that means you don’t have to keep the secret from Sinclair. Because if he knows?” she blows out a breath. “Ella, if he knew what I know, he’d lock her up in a tower. Like a princess in a fairytale.”

“Damn,” I say, pursing my lips, even though I can’t help being excited for my girl’s future even if I’m also very willing to save all of that drama for twenty years. “Baby trouble is right.”

“Baby trouble,” Cora says with a sigh, nodding, “is absolutely right.”

Chapter 500 – Happily Ever

Ella

“Nope,” Sinclair says, heaving himself out of bed and grabbing his phone off the bedside table as he does. “I can’t live like this, Ella – I’m calling Roger, I’ve got to know – ”

“Dominic!” I say, laughing and grabbing for him, trying to catch the edge of his pajamas and failing because I’ve got a sleeping baby in my arms and another pressed warmly to my side. “Don’t, come back!”

“I just!” he says, pressing the phone to his ear and running a frantic hand through his hair. “You tell me that there’s drama in her life, but that it’s no big deal, and that it’s girl stuff? What the hell am I supposed to do with that for the next twenty years!?”

“You’re supposed to sit down,” I say, laughing harder now and patting the mattress on his side of the bed, still warm from his delicious body heat. “Honestly, if this is the way you react after all of our daughters’ baptisms, we’re not having them anymore – ”

Sinclair sighs and pulls the phone from his face, slumping back down on the bed. “Fine,” he sighs. “Just boys, after this.”

“Mmkay, sweetie,” I murmur, even though my mind flashes back to the vision my mother’s priests gave me so long ago. We’ve got two more coming I think a boy and a girl. But who knows what their own futures hold.

“I’m glad you came to your senses and hung up the phone,” I murmur, scooting myself and my two children closer to him, my voice a little smug.

“I didn’t,” Sinclair mutters, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Roger just didn’t pick up.”

I grin at him, shaking my head. “Why can’t you just take good news for what it is? Human families don’t get any insight when their children are born, and Roger and Cora told us that Ariel has an incredible life. The drama – it’s going to happen whether or not you know what it is.”

“Well, you know what it is,” he says, sending me a rueful little glare.

“I do not,” I say, laughing and resting my head on his shoulder. “Cora knows, and she has sworn Roger to secrecy. Ariel’s life – it’s her business. I think we should be just grateful that we know our two children are going to grow to be healthy and happy.”

“I know,” Sinclair sighs, pulling me closer, relaxing and letting himself feel his exhaustion, finally, as the morning light streams around the curtains that we’ve pulled

shut so we can get some sleep. He turns his head and kisses my hair after a moment, which makes me smile as I look down at my baby girl, my thumb tracing long strokes along my beautiful son's cheek.

We stay that way for a long moment, peace and contentment radiating through the four of us and along our bonds.

"Dominic," I say quietly, my mind turning softly. "What do you think? If you had the chance...would you want to know? What your godmother saw, what was all laid out for you by the Goddess?"

"What do you mean?" he murmurs, and I turn my head to look at him, smiling when I see that his eyes are moving between our two perfect kids.

"I mean," I say after a long moment, and his green eyes shift to me. "If you... had a chance. To know that...your first mating was going to eventually fail. But that there was me, on the other end of it. And all the confusion at the start when we met and I was already pregnant with your kid, and everything we went through, and the two beautiful children at the end – "

"Alongside a wonderful partnership," he murmurs, tugging me close and kissing my cheek, "which, honestly, is my favorite part – "

"Even more than the kids!?" I gasp, my mouth falling open a bit.

"I mean, the kids," he says, shrugging as if they're not much, which makes me laugh. But then he goes a little rigid as he realizes something, raising his eyes to glare at me a bit. "Wait, are you saying you like the kids more than me!?"

My laughter bursts from me now as I shake my head at him. "No, Dominic. I think – I mean, I think we both mean the same thing. It's our little family that results from all of it, and each part of it is individually wonderful, and of course you are at the center of all of it for me. You're – you're my mate, my love." I shake my head, smiling at him. "The center of my universe. But the whole universe we've built, Dominic it's all wonderful."

"That's precisely what I mean, and how I feel," he says with a steady sigh, tilting my face up to press a soft kiss to my mouth. "You just say it way better than me."

"Well," I say, shaking my hair back over my shoulders haughtily. "I have a way with words."

"Mmhmm," he hums, dropping his head a little to press a kiss to the underside of my jaw and then to my neck, sending a shiver through me. " Amongst other things."

I smile and wait for him to lift his head again, bringing his gaze back to mine. "So?" I say, pushing, truly wanting his answer. "What do you think? If your godmother saw all of this – would you have wanted to know?"

He takes a deep breath, thinking it through. "Well," he says, contemplative, "on one hand, it would have saved me a great deal of stress and sadness at some points in my life, to know that this was waiting for me that this was the true, wonderful hand the Goddess was waiting to deal for me."

He passes some memories down the bond to me in a flash of explanation for what he means when he says a great deal of stress and sadness. I see the loss of his mother, the years he spent tortured, pining for his first mate when she was with Roger, and then their tumultuous marriage, the wanting a child and never being blessed with one, the mating bond he eventually rejected. Then the years after that of just feeling ...empty. And then of meeting me, and wanting me, and wanting our child but not knowing what it meant, to have a child with a woman he thought was human...

I nod, truly understanding. "It would have helped me to," I say. And then I do the same, passing my own memories to him. The horrible years with only Cora by my side, when we each had to play mother and sister to each other. The horrible unknowing years when I was at my darkest point, and then my terrible ex-boyfriend, who I had truly thought I loved – but who betrayed me so deeply. The terrible longing for a child I thought I would never have...

"But," Sinclair says, staring deep into my eyes and passing the warm balm of his love down our bond to me, wiping away those terrible memories. "As much as it would have been good to know what was waiting, Ella...it's important to me that we chose this, and we fought for it – every step of the way. That it wasn't just some fate that the Goddess gave to us. That even if it was fated...we wanted it, we wanted each other. We'd have picked this life anyway, even if it wasn't fate."

Tears slip down my cheeks as I nod at him, because now he's the one saying it just right.

"I'd pick you, Dominic," I say, my voice shaking with my love for him. "In a thousand lifetimes, a thousand chances to make the same choices – I'd do it all again."

He shakes his head at me as tears fill his own eyes and he leans forward, pulling me against him while somehow miraculously managing not to crush our children between us as he holds me tight in his arms.

"So, I guess it wouldn't matter," he murmurs against my hair as I sniff back my tears and nod. "Knowing or not? I've got you now, and our wonderful life, and it's worth everything we paid to get here. You're my everything, trouble."

And I laugh, pulling back a little and shaking my head at him and giving him a smile even. "I think we're obliged now," I say, nodding down at our little girl, "to pass the 'trouble' nickname fully down to Ariel."

"Nah," Sinclair says, smirking at me as he moves his thumbs over my cheeks, wiping away all of my tears. "She might be baby trouble, but you'll always be my trouble. And you'll always be mine."

And I nod, and smile softly at him, because...well, because that feels just right.

"And what about this one?" I say, running my hand over Rafe's soft hair, smiling down at his little body pressed close to me, his mouth just lightly open, his long lashes dark against his chubby cheeks. "He's not trouble?"

"This little guy?" Sinclair says, grinning as he reaches out a hand to rub his son's back. "No way – he's too sweet to be much trouble. He's going to be the best kid."

"You're going to have to teach him to act tough," I say with a little laugh, "or everyone's going to see right through him and take advantage of his soft heart."

"No problem," Sinclair says with a grin. "We'll build him some steely armor to protect that sweet heart of his."

I smile too as I look at my son, but my mind is on his father, who is so much the same. My sweetheart Alpha – the scariest and most powerful man in the world, probably, but also the kindest person I've ever met. A good King, a better mate – a wonderful father.

God, how did I get to be so lucky?

"I love you, Dominic," I sigh, resting my head against him and closing my eyes.

"I love you too, Ella," he murmurs in reply, his arm still holding me tight as we both drift off into a doze, our much-loved, long-desired perfect son sleeping between us. Our wonderful, brand new baby girl still curled against the crook of my arm.

And, even though I know I shouldn't let myself doze like this – that I should put Rafe in his crib, and Ariel in her bassinet –

That Dominic and I should lay down and get some proper sleep stretched out so we don't wake up with aching necks

That I'm going to be up in twenty minutes anyway when Ariel cries, needing to be fed or changed

Well. I just let myself fall into the doze anyway. Because everything is just so perfect right now in this moment that not a single part of me wants to disturb it.

And so, curled warm against my mate with my arms wrapped around the children I always dreamed I'd have but thought I never could, I sleep in complete peace, content in the knowledge that when I do wake up?

It's going to be the start of the rest of my wonderful life – one I'm so thrilled I get to live with my Alpha by my side.

THE END