

Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 256 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 come 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 snuffle, 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 for 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.