

Accidental Surrogate For Alpha

Accidental Surrogate for Alpha by Caroline Above Story Chapter 161

Chapter 161 — 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 162 – 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 Sinclairs 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."

#Chapter 163 – 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.”

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 165 – 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.”