

Accidental Surrogate For Alpha By Caroline Above

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."

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Grumbling with annoyance, Sinclair looked back to Ella,

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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

sur-prise. 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 cause humans are so accepting of those who are different."

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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 so-

ciety.

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“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

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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.

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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.

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His wolf might want her, but taking his eye off the ball at this stage in the game was dangerous to all of them.

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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 Sinclair's penetrating green eyes.

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every look from

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,

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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.

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"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."

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"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.”

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“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.

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“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 sib- lings 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 know they’re a recipe for disaster.

Half-asleep, it seems that a person came to my bedside.

Who?

Chapter 33 Sinclair Returns

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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 dozes.

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, con-

tent 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 for-

mer.

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.”

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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 thinks 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

I 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 af-

ternoon 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.

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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.

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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 re-cite, 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

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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, re-birth, 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...

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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

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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.”

i “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?

77 54%

All of a sudden it all seems like far too much to compre-

hend. 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.”

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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.”

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“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.”

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“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?"

34 35%

"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 ex-

claim.

ters.

“I suppose it’s better to be safe than sorry.” Corry coun-

“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.”

51 49%

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.

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“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!?"

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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.

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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.

35 72%

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.

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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

55 78%

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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.

75 904

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.

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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

17.31%

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 El- la.”

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

Trying to keep up a brave front, I turn back to Roger, “Tell me what just happened.”

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“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.”

73.39%

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.

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“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

498 her,

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 any- one wanted to hurt Ella, the way she trembles at Roger's de- scription, 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."

17.22%

Leaning my lips to Ella's ear, I can't help the ragged huski-

ness 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 re- ferring 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 suspi- cions. 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

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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.

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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’ll 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

298 Machers

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

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88 Voucher.

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

16 10%

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?"

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I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, "Am I in a lot of trouble?"

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"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 every-

33 14%

thing 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.”

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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

I have left is my independence, and now you’re demanding that too!”

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“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

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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."

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"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.

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"Fine," He sighs, looking as though he's about to deliver my death sentence. "I'm sorry, Ella, but there really was some- one in your rooms the other night."

Chapter 40 Intruder

283 Vouche

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 bath- room?" 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 fa- ther! And you blamed me like I was supposed to know about the threat!"

"Ella -" He begins in a placating tone.

788 Vouchers

“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?”

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“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.”

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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 overprotective-ness 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

35.08%

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.

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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

55 73%

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.”

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“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?”

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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.”