

Accidental Surrogate For Alpha By Caroline Above

#Chapter 61 – Baby Bump

Ella

“Wait what?!” I exclaim, certain that I must be hearing things. Sinclair can’t have possibly just said what I think he did.

He smiles, tracing circles on the soft skin of my belly. “You heard me.” He teases.

“Completely naked?” I gape, blushing at the idea alone.

“Everyone? Even the children?”

“I’ve told you, shifters don’t associate nudity with sex the way that humans do. It’s our natural state.” Sinclair explains gently. “No one feels self conscious, because there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

I should have known something was up when he came in this afternoon and woke me from my nap, climbing into bed behind me and sliding his hand underneath the hem of my top so he could feel the baby. I’d whined at being disturbed, but cuddled closer to him anyway, stretching into his tender caresses like a sleepy kitten. Only once I was purring with contentment did he broach the subject he’d come to discuss.

The fourth night of the Solstice festival is apparently devoted to something called moonbathing. I’d hesitated over this idea when Aileen first showed me the schedule, but had been so distracted by the idea of the wild hunt and the masquerade ball that I hadn’t been able to focus on it. Now, however, I can’t focus on anything else. Sinclair has just explained that the moonbathing ritual involves stripping off one’s clothes and anointing our bodies with oil, then laying out in the full moon’s light. I’d been okay with this

up until the point when Sinclair clarified that it would happen at a sacred stone circle surrounded by other shifters.

“But... it’s also natural to be curious about other people’s bodies, doesn’t everyone stare? Doesn’t that bother you?” I squeak, thinking of all the times I’ve been uncomfortable beneath the male gaze when fully clothed, and not wanting to even imagine how much worse it would be naked.

“It doesn’t bother me to be studied or admired,” Sinclair shrugs, looking down at me intently. “But I can understand how that might be different if I was a human woman, and used to being looked at like an object. You have to realize that male wolves don’t disrespect she-wolves that way.”

“So when you were with Lydia, it didn’t bother you for your mate to be naked in front of

other men?” I don’t think I would be so generous if the tables were turned, in fact I’m already thinking about all the she-wolves that will undoubtedly be checking out Sinclair and I do not like it.

“No shifter would be stupid enough to lay their eyes on the Alpha’s mate in the manner you’re thinking not if they want to keep their heads connected to their bodies.” Sinclair assures me.

“And if they’re envious, it’s no threat to me. In fact I enjoy having a partner others covet, it just goes to show I won the lottery, and reminds me to be the best mate I can, so that I’ll be worthy of her.”

I consider this for a moment. On one hand I’m very wary of any man who wants a partner they can show off like a trophy that was exactly what Mike did and I know it’s a far cry from being truly valued or respected. At the same time, Sinclair isn’t talking about women the same way Mike used to. He doesn’t want to show off his mate to make others feel jealous, or feel

threatened if someone else glances her way. What's more, he associates envy with her intrinsic value, not a boost to his own ego or masculinity.

"Now," Sinclair continues, a sharp edge in his voice now. "If they were to disrespect her, to sniff around her despite my claim, or set a single paw on her..." He growls wordlessly, sending shivers down my spine. "Now that would be another matter entirely."

I snort when I see the menacing expression on his face.

"Sometimes I get caught up thinking shifters are so far ahead of humans, and then you say things like that and I remember you're just big furry beasts wearing the guise of civility."

Sinclair chuckles. "We all have our contradictions."

"I don't." I argue, notching my chin up defiantly.

"I beg to differ." Sinclair replies warmly, his fingers dancing over my bare skin in increasingly sensuous patterns. "You're the fiercest little ball of mischief I've ever encountered, but you're also the sweetest thing I've ever seen," He purrs, "or held..." His lips drop to my neck, just barely grazing them across my skin. "or tasted."

"Hey, none of that." I object, pushing his head away. "I don't need you getting me all worked up right before I go strip naked in front of a hundred strangers." I admonish, my voice trailing off as the reality of the event ahead of us sets in.

"It's gonna be okay." Sinclair promises. "Besides, all anyone's going to be doing is trying to figure out if you're showing yet. This is a royal baby, remember." He says, tapping a finger on my belly button.

“Well they’re going to be disappointed.” I sigh, though in truth it’s been a few days since I stood in front of the mirror and glared at my middle, willing it to show signs of the life growing within.

“Are you sure about that?” Sinclair arches a brow. “This feels like a baby bump to me.”

I promptly push up onto my elbows so that I can look down at my stomach, even though sitting up puts my neck dangerously close to Sinclair’s mouth again. I can almost feel him thinking about stealing more kisses while I’m distracted. Ever since we admitted that we’re attracted to each other, he’s been more forward about showing me affection, which only makes it more difficult to resist my feelings. If only I didn’t enjoy his touch so much, maybe then I could be more forceful about rebuffing his advances.

His oversized hand is sprawled over my tummy, keeping my shirt bunched up beneath my breasts. It’s hard to see anything with his palm in the way, so he traces the outline of my womb with a featherlight touch. Sure enough I’m surprised to see the smallest of swellings. just north of my pelvis. I suppose part of shifters’ short gestation is seeing these changes much sooner than expected, but that scares me too. What if my body doesn’t have enough time to adjust, to go through all the changes human mothers spend nine months manifesting.

I think Sinclair can sense my unease, because the next thing I know he’s kissing my belly once, twice, three times.

“I said no kisses.” I scold him, earning myself a low rumble in Sinclair’s chest, and his green eyes flashing at my challenge.

“I’m kissing the baby.” He insists, a devious, wolfish grin on his face. “He likes it.”

“Oh sure.” I reply tartly, “blame it on the baby.”

“He does.” Sinclair repeats, kissing me again before slyly adding, “But then he likes it because it makes you happy.”

“You’re incorrigible.” I roll my eyes, but I’m blushing too. And more than that, I’m amazed to think the tiny life growing inside me knows what I’m feeling this way. It didn’t seem strange when the doctors told me he could sense my stress, but I suppose I attributed that to him being impacted by the physical symptoms of stress, not truly feeling my emotions. My heart both swells and tightens in my chest as I contemplate this idea, that we have a bond every bit as strong as Sinclair’s, I just can’t feel it.

Suddenly I’m crying, and Sinclair stops his teasing and crawls back up my body, clucking sympathetically. “What is it sweetheart?”

“Nothing, I’m just being silly.” I hiccup, shaking my head. “It’s hormones, that’s all.”

“Why don’t you tell me, and then we can decide together if it’s silly.” He replies, brushing the pads of his thumbs over my cheeks, caressing the tears away.

“I just wish I had a connection to him like you do.” I confess. “I wish I could sense what he’s feeling. I want you to be close with him, of course. I’m just... jealous, I suppose. You’ll always be the better parent, you’ll always know what he needs without asking, and I’ll be bumbling around blind in comparison.”

“That’s not silly at all.” Sinclair assures me. “It’s only natural that you should feel that way. But you’re wrong about something, Ella. You’ll have a bond with the baby every bit as strong as mine by the time you bring him into the world. Mothers have connections to their babies. Most fathers even shifter fathers can never have, because we don’t carry and deliver them. We can’t nourish them with our own bodies, we’re not the ones who sheltered and

protected them in the first and most vulnerable months of their existence.”

“You promise it will be as strong as yours?” I ask, sniffing.

“I think you’re focusing on the idea of a bond too much.” Sinclair muses. “You have to remember that a connection isn’t the same as a relationship, Ella. All parents are bonded with their children, but some still have terrible relationships, just like everyone is bonded to their lover, but some couples are much happier than others.”

“I think it’s difficult because it’s just such an abstract idea.” I share, already feeling less blue.” I mean, you tell me something is magic and I’m automatically going to assume it’s more powerful than natural things.”

“But magic is part of nature.” Sinclair corrects me. “The Goddess created all of it at the same time. The difference is simply that you didn’t know about it.”

“Right.” I nod slowly, telling myself to keep this reminder at the forefront of my thoughts. “Better?” Sinclair prompts, stroking my hair.

“Yes, thank you for making me talk about it.” I profess, feeling a strong urge to hug the big Alpha.

“Always.” He agrees, “Now get ready, we have some moon bathing to do.”

My eyes go wide. “Wait, I spoke too soon, I’m not better at all, I think I need to stay home and process this.”

Sinclair chuckles, “nice try, trouble. We leave in half an hour.” He leans down and kisses the

tip of my nose before sliding from the bed, leaving me with a low purr. “And I, for one, can’t wait.”

#Chapter 62 – Moon Bathing

Sinclair

“This is the weirdest thing I’ve ever done!” Ella exclaims, shifting restlessly beside me. We’re just arrived at the festival, and though she’s only wearing a silk robe, she looks stunning. She’s also nearly beside herself with anxiety, and getting increasingly feisty the closer we get to the big event. !

“Poor darling, you’re shaking.” I croon, pulling Ella into my arms and rubbing her back. She’s all sharp edges, stiff and grumbling unhappily into my chest, but snuggling into my warmth despite her grumpy mood.

“Of course I’m shaking, it’s freezing. I’m wearing next to nothing and it’s winter!!” She exclaims, gesturing to the snow falling around us. “How are we even supposed to do this ridiculous ritual without getting hypothermia!”

“First because wolves run much hotter than humans.” I answer, catching her hands and tucking them between our bodies so they’ll get warm too. “Second, because the stone circle is surrounded by thermal pools and the base is heated from below by hot springs. I promise. you’ll be plenty warm. And if you’re not then there’s always body heat.”

I’m waggling my eyebrows suggestively, but Ella doesn’t laugh. She pouts, peeking up at me, I thought you were going to respect my wishes.”

“I’m doing my best.” I share, “but it isn’t easy. Especially when you’re so beautifully responsive.”

This much is true, I might have an easier time respecting Ella's boundaries if she didn't react so openly and passionately to my advances. But the reality is that she's obviously affected by me, and it's hard not to feel encouraged when she melts into my arms like hot honey.

"That's just my hormones." Ella insists. "You have to listen to what I say, not what I do."

"Ah, so 'actions speak louder than words' doesn't count in your book." I tease.

"That's right." Ella answers stiffly, "My body isn't my own right now, it's the baby's. That means you have to take my word over my reactions."

"Alright." I agree. "But I hope you'll give me a little slack when I slip up."

"I thought being an Alpha was about always being in control." Ella argues.

"Maybe," I concede, chafing her chilled limbs with my warm hands. "But my wolf is in charge when it comes to mating, and he's not nearly as patient as I am."

"But there's no mating here!" Ella objects, "In case you've forgotten, I'm human!" Her whispered words are barely audible even to my own ears, but I still glance around to ensure we can't be overheard.

"I haven't forgotten." I answer. I wish I could. It seems if I'm not thinking about romancing Ella, I'm thinking about how vulnerable she is living among shifters. Even now, I'm painfully aware of how fragile she is in comparison, surrounded on all sides by vicious predators. The poor thing is still shivering and I'm worried she might have been right, without a wolf's resilience to the elements,

it might be too cold for her to participate. Though in truth, I think it's only partly due to the weather. I suspect she's trembling with apprehension as much as

she is with cold.

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Guilt washes over me, and for a moment I wonder if I'm doing a terrible thing putting Ella through all this. Not only these events that throw her so far out of her comfort zone and into a world she doesn't yet understand, or even asking her to suffer through the cold and discomfort, but asking her to tell so many lies. Asking her to perform an elaborate fraud, against her own honest nature to deceive and trick people. I don't believe it's possible to corrupt Ella, or her life would have already done it, but it feels very hard to forgive myself for forcing her into this situation. In hindsight I can clearly see that's what I did it might have been her idea, but she'd felt like she had no other choice, fore I told her I would take her child.

away.

I know all the justifications for our scheme – avoiding a civil war, preventing a despot from taking the throne, saving countless lives. And there's no way of justifying ending all this just to save one human some distress yet I want to. I want to go back in time and tell Ella I will keep her and the baby a secret so that they'll never be in danger from my enemies, and never have to adopt this facade. I want to call off our arrangement so that she want shiver anymore. Now not only do I think my wolf is broken, I think I'm losing my mind as well.

“What?” Ella presses me sullenly, “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“I was thinking that when this is done we can go home and curl up in front of a warm fire, and then I’ll rub your feet and feed you hot chocolate.” I answer.

“Why can’t we just go home now? We’ve made an appearance and kissed for the cameras! We should just say I’m ill and make our apologies.” Her tone goes from exasperated and sharp, to sounding so small I might believe it belonged to a child. “I don’t want to do this.”

“I know, baby.” I murmur, tucking her head to my chest and stroking her long, silky hair. “I promise we’ll leave as soon as we’re able.”

“But Dominic-” Ella is raising her voice now, and trying to pull away from me. I know she’s only lashing out because she’s feeling so much emotional turmoil. I’m sure the pregnancy hormones aren’t helping, but it’s clear she needs me to help ground her, to calm her down. because she can’t calm herself.

I tighten my hands on her, beginning to purr even as I rumble. “This is an important ritual.” I explain, in a tone that makes her visibly squirm. “I know you’re cold and afraid Ella. Honestly, I would spare you this if I could but missing this isn’t like missing the feast. It would be seen as disrespect to the Goddess.”

Ella is struggling internally, her body responding to my purrs and my dominance, but her mind no doubt consumed with battling thoughts of duty and unhappiness. Her eyes begin to shine, and I fear she might start crying.

No, I hate it when she cries. My wolf complains, not that he needs to remind me. He whines like a pup any time Ella sheds so much as a single tear, even for silly reasons like eating all of her snack. I increase my purrs, and Ella glares at me. “That isn’t fair, I don’t want to be comforted right now.”

“Maybe you don’t want it, but you need it.” I answer sternly, and Ella takes up a mutinous muttering.

“Ella, I’m going to take care of you. It will be over before you know it. I won’t make us stay a minute longer than we have to.”

She’s still glaring, but her plump lower lip is also trembling. “Fine.” She snaps, her voice thick with emotion. “But for the record, I don’t like you very much right now.”

“I know.” I smile, kissing her upturned mouth. I’m not the least bit surprised when she nips me, quickly sinking her little teeth into my lip and releasing them again just when I begin to feel the sting. My wolf growls deep in my chest, loving her fire but not about to let her get away with this. Ella trembles again, but in a very different way this time. Her demeanor is exactly that of a chastised she wolf, reassured and excited by her mate’s strength.

“Behave.” I instruct, not bothering to soften my tone. The light in her eyes is impish now, rather than sad or frightened, and I’m pleased to see her cheeks flushed with color. “It’s about to begin.”

I lead Ella through the moonlit forest, following paths so familiar to me, yet completely new to Ella. Before long we’re crossing the bridges straddling steaming thermal pools, and crossing into the sacred space of the stone circle.

I pull my robe off, then reach for the belt at her waist. “Just look at me.” I advise, “Keep those gorgeous eyes on mine, and just pretend we’re all alone.”

Ella nods nervously, and I carefully uncinch her robe, pulling the garment from her body and baring her for all to see. I don’t take my eyes off her either, even as I’m handed the necessary oils by

an attendant. I drip the slick liquid onto my fingers, then paint it onto Ella's body. I deposit the sweet smelling substance on her neck, her temples, then use a different bottle for her wrists and palms – then finally I take the third oil, and trace the letters of my name over her heart.

I wish I could look down and watch the oil dribble down between her luscious breasts, to appreciate the beauty of her form, but she needs the eye contact more than I need to satisfy my lustful urges. "You're doing so well, sweetheart." I praise, handing her the bottles so that she can anoint my skin. Following my example, she applies the oils without taking her eyes away from mine, going up on her tiptoes to reach my temples.

When it's done, we stretch out on the heated stone slab beneath our feet, and I pull Ella close, using my big body to block her from view from as many people as I can. Still she doesn't take her eyes from mine, and I continue praising her, genuinely proud of how brave she's being. We lie together under the moon until her eyes grow heavy, and I know it's time to leave.

When I wake the next morning, I'm unsurprised to be greeted with more headlines about us though these are a far cry from the last breaking news in which we featured. Every last article is a veritable celebration of our mating, eagerly reporting that we're so in love that we couldn't take our eyes off one another.

I'm thrilled, but I know we're facing a far greater challenge tonight – the wild hunt has finally arrived.

#Chapter 63 – Meeting Sinclair's Wolf

Ella

“How are you feeling?” Sinclair asks, standing in the doorway of my bedroom. The wild hunt is tonight, and I know he’s not merely asking about my morning sickness or fatigue.

“Nervous.” I confess. “Do you think...” I trail off, blushing and unsure if I can actually speak the question I need to ask.

“What is it Ella?” He inquires, coming forward with an encouraging smile.

“Do

you think I could see your wolf before we go tonight, just so that I’ll recognize it when I see you?” I whisper, barely loud enough to hear myself, but knowing Sinclair’s wolf ears will be more than capable of picking up on the sound. And so I won’t be scared. I add silently in my

head.

“Of course.” He chuckles, “That’s a great idea. I should have thought of it myself.”

His powerful hands move to the buttons on his shirt, and I find myself taking a step back. What are you doing?”

“You wanted to see my wolf, I don’t want to ruin this shirt.” He shrugs. “It’s one of my favorites.”

“Right.” I breathe, “Right, of course.”

He continues stripping off his clothes, and I work hard to avert my gaze. So far I’ve been very successful in avoiding temptation by not looking at his body in these vulnerable moments, and I’m not about to change that now on the day when it’s more important than ever that we practice self control.

“Does it hurt, shifting?” I ask, staring at my fidgeting fingers.

“It does the first time.” Sinclair shares, “The first time is almost unbearable, it takes hours. and hours, but once you’ve gotten it over with it happens fast as lightning, too quickly for you to feel the pain of your bones breaking and rearranging.”

“That sounds ghastly.” I feel suddenly lightheaded, “How old are you when you shift the first time?”

“It’s a little different for everyone most make the change when they go through puberty.” Sinclair informs me, pulling off his trousers.

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Already I’m thinking of my baby – my son eventually suffering through this sort of grisly shift, and I don’t like it one bit. “What was yours like, was anyone with you?” I squeak.

“Mine was as painful as anyone else’s. But my father was with me, he got me through it, just like I’ll do for our son.” He states, a promise in his voice.

“Good.” I sigh, feeling relieved to know Sinclair will help guide our child through the process. I can imagine Henry was a very gentle and supportive presence for Sinclair, and I know he’ll be the same. “I suppose... I probably wouldn’t be allowed to help?”

Sinclair offers me a tender smile. “No sweet Ella. I’m afraid it would be much too dangerous.” He comes forward, taking my face in his oversized hands. This is probably the first time he’s ever been unclothed when I’m not, and I’m amazed at how much stronger I feel with my own.

body covered. I never realized until now how vulnerable it is to be undressed and when others are not, but Sinclair doesn't seem to mind one bit. He's still wielding the power

exposed

in this room, and part of me resents his constant strength. "Now, do you want to talk, or do you want to meet my wolf?"

"Yes, sorry." I flush.

"Don't apologize." He murmurs, "and don't get close to me until after I've shifted, you don't want to be within reach of my claws when I make the transformation."

I nod wordlessly, my pulse pounding in anticipation. Sinclair backs away from me, holding my gaze the same way he did last night at the stone circle. I keep my eyes on him, watching with horrified fascination as he ensures he's not near anything breakable, then disappears. There's a loud crack and the air seems to go blurry, I even feel a bit nauseous trying to keep track of the rapid movement. However when my eyes adjust and I'm able to take in the familiar room again, I see that where Sinclair was standing a moment before, now there is only a huge, black wolf with glowing green eyes.

I'm sure my eyes are as wide as saucers, and I feel my jaw going slack. "That's not a wolf that's a bear!" I blurt out, saying the first thought which came to my mind.

The wolf, who is much, much too large far larger than any natural wolf and probably almost as tall as I am gives me an affronted look, as if I've insulted him gravely.

"I'm sorry, not a bear!" I quickly amend, still trying to reconcile the fact that the beast in front of me is actually the man who spends every night wrapped around me like a very muscular heated

blanket. “But how are you bigger as a wolf than you are as a man!”

He huffs and rolls his eyes, sitting on the rug and waiting patiently for me to recover from my shock

“I mean honestly, I could ride you.” I point out, my head filled with images of me mounted on his back like a particularly deadly variety of horse.

Suddenly Sinclair’s expression goes so mischievous and heated that I don’t need to hear him speak. I know exactly what he’s thinking and his mind is clearly in the gutter. “Not like that! You know what I mean.” I’m amazed that anyone could manage to be so suggestive without speaking a word, or even possessing human features. “I... what do I do, how do you communicate with other wolves when you’re like this. Do you have mental links like you do with the baby?”

He nods, wagging his tail and astonishing me. I never imagined that the imposing Alpha would ever do something so very doglike, but then again his silly side always surprises me. Suddenly it seems positively hilarious that Dominic Sinclair is sitting in front of me with the squirmy energy of a puppy, and I realize that he’s holding himself back from approaching me until I’m comfortable with this.

“Can – Can I touch you?” I inquire meekly.

The furry behemoth nods again, and though I don’t know how I understand his reasoning, I know he’s waiting for me to come to him. It takes a minute for me to find the courage to move my leadened feet, but I manage. I slowly cross the room, feeling terribly anxious to be approaching a creature out of the horror stories I grew up fearing, even though I know it’s just. Sinclair.

Up close he's even larger than I realized, still taller than me even seated. He looks as though he

could snap me up in one bite, and my mind spins with mathematical equations, trying desperately to figure out how his mass increased so much. It defies logic.

You're overthinking it. It's magic a man became a wolf but you're hung up on how big the wolf is?

"This is weird, this is so weird." I moan, ringing my hands as I close the distance between us. I hesitantly reach out towards him, sinking my fingers into his thick, downy fur. "Oh, you're really soft... I think this is the strangest thing that's ever happened to me."

The next thing I know, Sinclair has pounced, apparently no longer able to contain himself. He gently eases me to the ground despite the suddenness of his attack. He's standing over me then, licking my face and making me giggle and squeal as I try to push him away. Eventually he settles, laying his big head on my belly and pinning me to the floor. Soft purrs rumble in his chest, and I find myself sliding my hands back into his fur, massaging his head and ears and making him groan contentedly.

"You do know that if you crush this baby while it's still inside of me, you'll never get your heir!" I complain, amazed at how heavy his furry snout is.

Instead of removing it, Sinclair nudges his cold nose up under the hem of my top, resting his soft muzzle against my bare belly and peering up at me with those wolfish eyes. The cloth of my shirt rests gently over his snout, and his heated breath dances over my tender breasts, traveling through the tented material and fluttering over my skin. "Dominic, that tickles!"

The wolf makes a sound that resembles a laugh, and the next thing I know, Sinclair is a man again, though his head is still under my top and he's kissing my belly. "All right you," he says after a moment, pulling me up to a sitting position. "Now how are you feeling, still nervous?" "Yes." I admit, "though not about your wolf."

"You're ready for this, Ella." Sinclair encourages. "You're going to do beautifully. Just remember what I told you..."

"I know." I sigh. "Don't run when you catch me."

"Good girl." Sinclair praises, though he has no way of knowing the second half of this thought the words still ringing in my head. Unless I want you to run me down and make me yours. Unless I want you to claim me.

And now the only question is, will I be able to actually stop running when the time

#Chapter 64 – Lydia Gate Crashes

Ella

When we arrive at the edge of the forest where the ceremony is set to begin, I'm wearing a shimmering pearl-colored dress, which looks as if it's been spun from pure moonlight. Its straps are so thin it doesn't seem like they should be strong enough to hold up the flowing fabric, which plunges between my breasts, hugs my waist and then cascades out into a wide skirt with a graceful train. It's completely inappropriate for the cold weather, but a cape of plush black furs billows down my back and Sinclair's cozy heat is warming my left side. My shoulders are heavy with the weight of his arm, and I feel thankful the rough forest terrain made wearing high heels impossible.

We move through the crowds of reporters and admirers, pausing for photos and handshakes but not answering any questions. The press coverage from the moon bathing ritual was truly phenomenal, almost fawning in its analysis, and the crowds are getting bigger every day. Everyone seems to want to glimpse us for themselves, and I'm beginning to feel more like a museum attraction than a person.

It's hard to keep myself grounded when everyone around me is staring, jumping up and down yelling my name. This is business as usual for Sinclair, but I don't think I'll ever get used to it. I also don't know if I want my child subjected to all this attention. "It won't always be like this, right?" I ask, cradling my tiny baby bump as we move past the crowds. "Surely it's just the festival and how new our relationship is.

"Things will calm down." Sinclair agrees, his keen eyes not missing the way I try to shield our pup with my hands. "They'll be excited about the baby too, but they'll keep their distance. They know how protective new parents are, and as invasive as we can be about adult relationships, children are considered off limits."

"Good." I breathe, still frowning. "I don't like it, but I'll endure it as long as they leave the baby alone."

"After the campaign is over we can pull you out of the spotlight." Sinclair offers, "you'll be a new mother, it would be perfectly reasonable for your public presence to be diminished." Just then the wind shifts, and Sinclair scents the air, his muscles suddenly going very tense.

Right on cue, a snide voice sounds on our left, and a figure in white emerges from behind a tree. "What kind of Luna looks for excuses to get out of doing her job?" I don't need to look to recognize the speaker her tone is completely altered from when

she helped me in the bathroom, but there's no mistaking the nasal timbre of Lydia's voice.

Before I can even begin to process her words or get a good look at her, Sinclair pushes my body behind his, taking up a defensive stance between me and his ex-wife. "Are you really so desperate to force yourself in where you're not wanted, that you've been reduced to skulking around like a fox, Lydia?" A murmur moves through the gathered shifters, and I suspect calling a wolf a fox is something of an insult. Though I, as someone who has always liked foxes, can't help but feel a bit offended on their behalf.

"It certainly took you long enough to sense me." She complains, sounding more than a little bitter. "Are you really so preoccupied with your little pet that your wolf can't keep track of his surroundings?"

I'm trying to move back around in front of Sinclair, but he holds me fast, his arm reaching behind his body to lock me against him in an iron grip. I feel a little growl bubble up in my chest, only to be reduced to a trembling mess when he growls back, leaving no room for argument. "I guess that goes to show how little you mean to my wolf these days." Sinclair counters smoothly. "He doesn't even notice you when you're right in front of him."

I'm trying to peek around Sinclair's burly arm, but I can only catch a flash of Lydia's outraged expression before her venomous tongue is back at it, "Well you might not want me here, Sinclair, but as the only she-wolf who bears your mark, it's my right to begin the hunt with you."

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My slow brain scrambles to catch up, and I gradually understand that she's trying to take place in the ceremony. She thinks that I don't have the right to participate because Sinclair and I haven't

fully been mated, and suddenly I feel outraged myself. How dare she try to take our place? How dare she try to take Sinclair from us? The little voice in my head is in a full on rage, and any logic I might have used to calm it like the fact that Sinclair isn't ours in the first place, so it's impossible for him to be taken – goes completely by the wayside.

I can't recall ever feeling jealous or possessive about Mike. Heartbroken yes, but when I learned he was cheating I didn't feel envy for Kate, only sorrow for myself and all those wasted years. But I feel jealous now. I feel a possessive fury unlike anything I've ever experienced. Something raw and primal is building up inside me, and I don't know how to identify it or reign it in. Is this the pup too? Staking its claim on its father? Or have I lost my mind?

"You're out of your head, Lyd-"

I surge forward, slipping out of Sinclair's grasp by ducking underneath his arms and rounding his big body in a fit of righteous indignation. I can feel Sinclair reaching for me again, but I pull myself up to my full height and shoot him a warning glare over my shoulder before giving Lydia the full force of my ire. "The only mark you bear is of the wolf you tricked into marrying you after you ran out on this pack. If you want to participate in the hunt, go home to him or has he seen you for the snake you are and kicked you out?"

Lydia's eyes flash, and I wonder if I've hit too close to home. I also wonder if her new husband might have realized the same thing she did that Sinclair was never sterile, so their inability to conceive was probably a problem with her. Would an Alpha reject a mate that couldn't give him pups? Is Lydia back here because she has nowhere else to go?

Stop empathizing! The voice in my head admonishes angrily, You can feel bad for her later, right now there's a battle to win!

Who are you?! I cry in return. What battle? I'm not going to publicly humiliate a woman who's struggling with fertility.

Struggling with fertility doesn't mean she isn't a conniving bitch. The voice replies. And she's trying to take Sinclair. He's mine. Ours.

Before I can reply, Lydia snarls and I have to thrust a hand into Sinclair's chest to keep him from throwing my body behind his once more. "Better the mark of another than no mark at all. You don't even know what it truly means to be a mate." She snaps.

I press my palm to my belly again, drawing her attention to my unborn pup. "What stronger claim could there be than this miracle? I don't need Dominic's mark to know I belong to him

and I'm willing to wait for it until we can do it right, in a manner befitting a King and Queen." I declare, notching my chin up.

Lydia's expression flickered when I mentioned the pup, and again I felt a rush of sympathy for the other woman, but her eyes hardened and blazed when I called myself a queen. The shifters around us are whispering and muttering among themselves, many glaring at Lydia and grinning at me. I know I've done well when Sinclair presses his body flush to mine, his hands circling my waist from behind to help me cradle our pup. A satisfied purr rumbles in his chest as his lips move against my ear, "the baby likes it when Mommy's fierce." He shares, and my heart flip flops over hearing myself called Mommy for the first time. "And so do I." He praises. Feeling a rush of confidence and an inexplicable knowing that I'm close to the kill, I continue, "And we both know that there are many more ways to claim a mate than with a bite." I say with a sultry grin, sliding one hand up and around the back of Sinclair's neck, encouraging his affection. I've never done anything so brazen in my life, except perhaps the other night at the bonfire... or in that damned dream. At the same time, it feels

completely right that we should be fighting this battle together, and showing off our attraction for all to see.

Lydia takes one furious step towards me, and Sinclair emits a snarl so vicious that everyone around us cowers, Lydia included. I'm the only one able to withstand the force of his Alpha authority, which works well for our purposes. Since no one knows I'm human, they'll all assume I'm truly Sinclair's equal in spirit if not brute strength.

Lydia shudders and whimpers before turning tail and fleeing in the opposite direction. For some reason, I feel the strangest urge to chase after her, but Sinclair is holding me too tightly. "Not so fast feisty pants, we have more important things to do than chase after bitter exes." I have to crane my neck to look up at him, but his face is full of pride and anticipation as he announces. "It's time."

#Chapter 65 – The Hunt Begins

Ella

It's all come down to this.

My mind reels as I stare into the dark forest. For weeks I feel like Sinclair and I have been trapped in the same pattern: flirting, holding ourselves back, slipping up and falling in too deep, then retreating. It's felt like two steps forward and one step back, but the reality is that those one steps have gradually brought us closer to this point. The wild hunt feels like a turning point for our relationship – a critical test to decide whether we become lovers or stay friends if that's what you can call us.

I know it's up to me to decide. For all his affection, compliments and terms of endearment, Sinclair has promised to follow my lead when it comes to taking things to the next level. I appreciate his restraint, but there's also a part of me that wants him to take the

decision out of my hands. It's just one more impulse this pup has given me that I can't even begin to understand. I've never wanted anyone to decide anything for me in my entire life, yet here I am agonizing over my desire for a man I barely know, wishing I didn't have to be responsible for once in my life.

I think that's the problem. The temptation is so powerful that I want to throw caution to the wind, but I know better. I know so much better. So why am I still debating this?

Because it's Sinclair. He's different. He belongs to us. The little voice in my head encourages.

I don't know what drugs you've been taking, but you really need to get a hold of yourself. I counter, feeling more certain now that my conscience has demonstrated just how insane this pregnancy is making us.

This is temporary. It will pass when I give birth. I can't run around writing checks that my heart won't be able to cash in a few months. Focus on the pup, focus on the future.

I look around at the other participants in the ceremony: other she-wolves dressed in gowns, like my own, their mates glued to them like velcro in anticipation of the hunt. I'm sure Sinclair and I looked much the same a few moments ago, but now I've stepped forward to begin the ritual. Ethereal music fills the air, a nearby orchestra playing instruments I've never before seen, as drums and singing voices raise towards the full moon. Gooseflesh raises on my chilled skin, and for the first time since this journey began, I understand what Aileen meant when she said shifters can feel the Goddess's magic. I'm probably just imagining it, like someone who believes they've taken drugs and therefore acts intoxicated, but I could swear the very air feels different tonight.

I feel different tonight.

I close my eyes and raise my face towards the heavens, letting the strange sensations grow. Is it crazy to think I can actually feel the moon on my skin, or that the electricity pulsing through my veins is not merely my own excitement, but something more?

I can feel Sinclair's eyes on me, and I glance back at him as one of the attendants hands me a blazing lantern. Sinclair looks as though he's barely holding it together. He's wearing a fur cape like

my own, but underneath he's completely shirtless, sporting only sleek black trousers and bare feet. His green eyes are glowing through the darkness, and I can see his claws and fangs extended. His wolf must be right at the surface, and I remember what he told me about

his power being strongest tonight.

I won't be myself. He'd warned me. I'm not sure if he's fully lost himself yet, but I can feel the power rolling off of him in heady waves, at least I imagine I can. It must be so much more intense for the actual shifters. I find myself shivering and turning away before the voice in my head can tell me to go steal a kiss or immediately flee. Instead I take a deep breath and set off into the darkness, starting slowly as the music builds. Hundreds of floating lanterns are released into the sky as I disappear into the forest, and as soon as I'm out of sight, I increase my speed.

Sinclair made me promise not to run once he's caught me, but he didn't say anything about beforehand. I've never been a runner, but tonight nothing sounds better than racing through the trees and feeling the cold winter wind on my skin. The deep snow makes it difficult, but the golden light of my lantern casts a warm glow on the dense evergreen trees, and I race forward without hesitation.

I've been running for about five minutes, amazed that I don't feel even a little bit winded, when a piercing howl shatters the air. For one astonishing moment my body stops dead, trembling and quaking as Sinclair's wolf calls to me. The sound paralyzes me, no doubt giving him a head start as he takes up his pursuit, but once it's over I'm able to carry on. At this point a true she-wolf would abandon the lantern and clothing to shift, but Sinclair promised me no one would notice I don't. All the other wolves are much more concerned with their own hunts tonight, and they won't even enter the forest until Sinclair howls his victory once I'm caught.

I can still hear the distant music, and adrenaline and exhilaration flood my form as I continue running. I'm grinning so wide my cheeks hurt, and actually on the verge of giggling. Why haven't I ever run in the forest before? I had no idea what I was missing out on.

Sinclair howls again, and again I'm forced to stop until the shuddering need coursing through my body passes. This time I understand why I'm shivering and shaking this way, because the mere sound set my body alight. He might as well have been touching me, bringing all of my neglected nerve endings to life the way only he can. I'm beginning to really dislike his howls. I can't let him catch me, if he keeps howling he'll catch me. It isn't fair. The voice in my head. wines, throwing off the oppressive weight of his power to continue our flight.

Run, just run. I answer, not knowing where this is coming from. A few minutes ago I was determined to let Sinclair catch me, but now that seems impossible. It's not even an option. I don't want to be caught. I just want to keep running like this forever. I've never felt so free.

Who is Sinclair to stop us? My conscience inquires. He's not the boss of us, I'm never going to stop running and I don't care what he says.

Yes. I think in agreement. You're right, you're so right. We're never going to stop.

Another howl breaks the air, and I prepare myself to halt and battle the call, but for some reason my body doesn't respond this time. It's as if the third howl has no impact on me at all. Surely I haven't become immune? Am I so far away now that it can't affect me? That doesn't make any sense, he's ten times faster than I am- he's got to be closing the distance with every minute.

I'm still pondering this when I hear a distant growl, and it occurs to me that the third howl was a higher pitch than the first two. Is that supposed to mean something? Is he closing in on me? Was that the victory howl?

I cock my ears to the forest behind me, and sure enough I hear more than just music and ow!

songs. I expect the steady loping of a gargantuan wolf, but the air is muddled with too many noises – distant snarls and strange crashes, whimpers and whines. I thought the others wouldn't start the hunt until our part was finished? I think, a bolt of fear slicing through me. And that doesn't sound like sex.

In my periphery I think I glimpse a flash of movement, but then an identical flash happens on my other side. I start to whip my head back and forth, trying to get a hold of what I saw. Unfortunately I can't do this and keep my eyes on the path in front of me. I have to choose: look for dangers in my surroundings, or make sure I have an escape route.

The voice in my head isn't just urging me to run for fun now, but with the understanding that something is very wrong here. Finally I hear the steady thud of a wolf on my trail, his crashing and crunching in the dense snow much more swiftly than my own clumsy feet.

paws

But when another howl sounds in the distance, once that does nothing to summon my desire but seems to scream at me to run for my life, I realize: The wolf behind me isn't Sinclair, and he isn't alone.

#Chapter 66 – The Hunter Becomes the Hunted

Ella

When I realized I was being chased, I threw off my cape and veered off in another direction, hoping that the wolves weren't close enough to see me yet. If I'm lucky maybe I can throw them off my trail, if only for a moment. I throw down the lantern too. The moonlight is so bright that I can see the forest well enough, and the snow is so deep that I don't have to worry about trodding on rocks or sticks.

I take

up

the skirts of my dress in both hands, running as fast as I can faster than I've ever run before. I see a narrow creek on my right, a steady stream of water flowing along the banks, releasing steam into the air. I realize the stream must be thermal, like the pools around the stone circle. I momentarily debate jumping into the waters, both craving the warmth and knowing the water will disguise my scent.

But what if I have to get back out into the snow? I fret. I could die from hypothermia faster than the wolves could catch me.

I don't think so. The voice in my head answers. The wolves will catch you first unless you find a way to throw them off. It's not even like you can climb a tree they can shift and climb true. You better be right about this. I moan internally, jumping down into the streambed. The water comes up to my waist, and warmth quickly seeps through my dress. I dive beneath the surface, knowing I'll be faster swimming than running. I don't pause to try and track my pursuers, I simply go as fast as I can, praying this crazy plan will have worked – praying that Sinclair is out there somewhere, coming to help me.

I hate being dependent on anyone else and I hate feeling helpless, but I know that's exactly what I am in this situation. I'm at the mercy of these wolves and Sinclair's swiftness, and that would hurt badly enough even without knowing my weakness is threatening my baby's life as well.

I swim until the water becomes too shallow, jumping back into the snow and taking off again. I hear a roar behind me, and I know I've failed. I didn't throw them off at all, I probably just kept them at bay a while. I scan the forest ahead of me, searching for anything that might help me. Belatedly I realize I should have kept my lantern and set the bastards on fire, but then. hindsight is always 20/20.

Cursing myself, I zero in on some boulders, catching sight of a narrow crevice between the huge stones, I know it's my only chance. For once being tiny might help me, but only if the wolves aren't strong enough to break through rock. A month ago I would have thought this was a given, but now I'm not so sure.

I wedge my way into the crevice just in time, for now sooner have I wriggled into the tight space that a huge weight crashes into the

rock. Snarls and growls surround me, and clawed paws begin scrabbling at the opening in the rocks, trying to make purchase on my skin and drag me out.

The only piece of dignity I can boast is that I don't wet myself, but I certainly whimper and whine like a baby. I'm sobbing with terror, wishing I'd never agreed to this stupid ritual.

This isn't the first time I've thought I was going to die, but this time it matters a lot more. This time it won't only be my life that's lost. I might be able to come to terms with my own

end, but I can't bear the thought of my baby dying before it's even had the chance to be born. "Please," I pray, knowing the Goddess probably won't care about me, but hoping she'll care about my son. "Please help us."

Sinclair

She's running. My wolf howls with delight.

Of course she's running. I think amusedly, That's the whole point.

No, I mean she's not going to stop. My wolf clarifies, loping around in my head. Mine, she's finally mine!

It's taken all my willpower to wait the full five minutes to give my mischievous little human her head start, and as I prepare to shift, I wonder if my wolf knows something I don't. Surely he's just getting ahead of himself. We won't know what Ella decides until we catch up to her, but he seems to think this is a done deal.

I'd known there was a chance Ella would disobey my instructions and run from me tonight, and my inner wolf had certainly prayed she'd give me the excuse to finally make her mine, but I still feel anxious about the situation. I'd much rather take Ella to bed when I'm in full control, and I know as soon as I shift that will be out the

window. At the same time, I warned Ella I did my part and left the decision in her hands.

I know my reluctance and worry will disappear as soon as I give my wolf free reign, so I give him one last order before transforming. We have to be gentle.

He snarls in reply, as if affronted I might think he'd forget. After all, his job is just to catch her, all the rest comes after I've shifted back again. Even so, I know from experience that the haze of the solstice leaves him largely in control, and I won't take any risks – not with Ella.

With a sudden blur and a loud crack, I transform, only pausing to howl before I take off into the night. The howl is mostly for show – Ella might hear it, but she won't feel it the way a she-wolf does. She won't be temporarily frozen in place, struggling to fight my power over her, my demand that she answer my call. She won't understand that this is her first chance to submit, that raising her own voice into the air would be to accept me as her mate even before I've caught her.

I pick up Ella's scent and her tracks instantly, a thrill of excitement pulsing through my body as I think about everything I'm going to do once I've caught her. Will she protect herself like she should and stop running, or will she provoke me? Does she want to be with me as badly as I want to be with her? Will her base instincts make her surrender to lust, despite her humanity? Either way I'm going to take her home and spoil her rotten for doing so well with Lydia tonight, but the real question is how much fun we get to have first.

With the magic in the air tonight, I wonder why we've been fighting this so hard. I know all the reasons of course, but under the moon and the stars they all seem so silly. I don't care that Ella

isn't a wolf, and I don't care that we've started out on a lie. I just want her.

I howl again, but soon after I catch the scent of other wolves; wolves that shouldn't be anywhere near these forests, especially not tonight. I immediately recognize one, remembering his scent from the alley behind the club where Ella was attacked. My wolf snarls at the mere memory and as much as I want to attack, I have to figure out how many there are,

as well as where they're located.

I scent the air again, cocking my ears for more sounds and scanning the dense trees. Fury and fear crash into me when I realize there are at least half a dozen wolves in the woods with Ella and I, and that can only mean one thing: The Prince has chosen the hunt to make his next assassination attempt, only this time, I think he's targeting Ella and I both.

There are four rogues tracking me, but the other two are far ahead. I know instinctively that they've gone after Ella. They must have been in the forest waiting for us already, and now my sweet human and my pup might pay the price for my distraction. Maybe Lydia was right – I've been so caught up in her that I've gotten sloppy.

Or maybe Linda was part of it she certainly helped distract you. My wolf suggests viciously. She might be conniving, but I don't believe that of her. After all, if I'm dead she can't be queen. And in all honesty, the failure would still be mine even if she was plotting against me. Like it or not, I've missed threats brewing right under my nose. It's the canal attack all over again, only this time it's a thousand times worse. I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to Ella and the baby never!

I have to decide quickly. Do I dispatch the wolves nearest to me so I can run down Ella's attackers without added risk, or do I go straight to Ella and face them all at once. Four is certainly easier to defeat than six, but even one wolf against Ella is too much. I have to reach her before they can harm her. If I pause to fight my own attackers, they could easily kill her.

Unfortunately the rogues seem to understand this too. I'm sprinting ahead, racing towards Ella with every bit of strength and endurance I possess, when a huge red wolf barrels into me from the side.

#Chapter 67 – Finding Ella

Sinclair

The rogues aren't as smart as they think they are. Their only chance would have been to attack me all at once. Instead they try to lunge at me two at a time, giving each other time to rest and rebound in between attacks. At first – the first five seconds that is it works. The red wolf crashes into my side while a big gray beta slams into my right. Then the other two charge me, but as soon as I've seen what they're about – I adapt.

The next time a wolf lunges for me I meet him head on, snatching his neck between my jaws and violently ripping into him with my fangs. As soon as he falls I turn on the other, slashing at the other wolves with my front and hind legs while my mouth rips the next attacker limb from limb. I've tasted their blood now, and my worry for Ella and the baby is growing stronger with every moment that passes.

These four would have been outmatched with me on a good day, but the Prince was an idiot to send them on the Solstice, and he was certainly a fool to have them attack my mate at the same

time. Normal wolves can do extraordinary things to protect their families and I'm no ordinary wolf.

Within minutes their bodies are scattered around me, and I don't feel the slightest bit of remorse for killing them. These wolves are probably some of the same ones responsible for the attack at the canal, and while I might forgive an attack on me, I will never forgive an attack on my pack or the woman they believe is my mate.

Even if I was in a forgiving mood, I can't afford to let them get word back to the Prince. The wolves after Ella will know she hasn't shifted and they probably already communicated that with their friends. They'll realize that Ella isn't truly a she-wolf, and that secret is certainly going to die with them.

I sprint through the forest towards Ella and the other rogues. When I find Ella's abandoned coat and realize she's tried to lay a false trail I'm impressed, and when I realize she's gone into the stream I'm both proud and terrified. I can hear snarling in the distance, which means she's still alive. But how long has she been out of the water, and what have they done to her?

Finally I reach the boulders where Ella has taken refuge. The rogues are so busy clawing impotently at the rocks that they don't even notice my arrival. I thought I would be relieved to find Ella alive – and I am – but nothing prepared me for the primal fury I would feel actually seeing these wolves go after my sweet little human. The sounds of her cries egg me on, making me roar out my wrath so that the bastards will get away from her.

My vision turns to a red haze, and I don't even remember killing the rogues. One moment there's nothing but the blood roaring in my ears and the taste of blood on my fangs, and the next I'm opening my eyes to a scene of utter carnage. I can't recall ever inflicting so much damage on an enemy, I've literally torn them to

shreds, and only too late do I consider that Ella will have just listened to all of that.

She's still whimpering and crying, and I can hear her teeth chattering as well. Cursing myself, I shift back into my human form and use some snow to wash the blood from my face and limbs. Trying to shake off the violence, I go to kneel in front of the tiny cave into which Ella has forced herself. "Ella?"

A small whine meets my ears, and I try to steady my heaving breath. "It's alright, little one." I promise. "They're gone. They can't hurt you."

I listen for sounds of movement, and I remember the way she went into shock after the first attack. My Goddess, I think bitterly. Only a month together and there's already been more than one attack. Some protector I am.

"Can you come out to me, Ella?" I ask gently, wishing I could force my way in there with her. I can smell her blood, though it isn't as strong as the rogue's. Of course, that's not saying much, all the blood that was once inside them is now out, but it doesn't smell like Ella is bleeding badly.

Yet she doesn't move, and fresh panic lances through me she could have broken bones or frostbite and I wouldn't smell a thing. "Are you hurt? How long have you been out of the Water?"

Still there's nothing, and I'm becoming increasingly afraid I'm going to have to break through the rocks to reach her. I begin to purr, hoping this will break through her shock. enough to lure her out of hiding. "You did so well evading them and finding a hiding place, sweetheart." I praise. "You gave me time to reach you, but now you have to help me and come out so I can take care of you."

Bending down, I peer into the crevice, wondering if she might take my hand and let me pull her out. When I finally see her, however, I know she isn't in any state to help me. Her beautiful eyes are clenched tightly shut, tears streaming down her cheeks as she clamps her hands over her

ears, rocking back and forth in the small space. I doubt she can hear me, and I have a feeling she wouldn't see me even if she opened her eyes.

Ella's arms are covered in defensive wounds where she must have been shielding herself from the attacker's arms reaching in after her, and I immediately know reaching in myself will only frighten her more. I purr more loudly, and Ella's body seems to jolt, but just as quickly she doubles down, as if she's trying to block out the sensations as if she doesn't trust them. I never knew my heart could break just having someone refuse my comfort, but not being able to reach Ella now, when she needs me most, hurts more than I could have imagined.

"Okay, baby." I decide, wishing there was any other way, "I wish I could let you stay here until you're ready to come out, but it's too cold." I sigh. "I'm going to have to break through the rocks."

I know she can't hear me, but I continue talking to her in the hopes that she might come back to herself and understand.

She doesn't.

Instead I place both of my hands on either side of the break in the boulders, and I summon all of my strength to force them apart. It doesn't happen immediately, but I think of Ella and our baby being trapped in these rocks forever, and I channel all of my power into destroying her makeshift fortress. A thunderous crack fills the air as they split in two, and I snatch Ella out of the cave before any sediment can fall on her.

The moment I lay a hand on Ella her eye's snap open, but there's no recognition in her brilliant irises. Instead sharp, acrid fear pours out of her, and she thrashes against my hold, trying to break free. I wrap my arms tightly around her small body, but Ella fights me like a wildcat, kicking, hitting, scratching and biting for all she's worth. It's amazing how difficult it

is to keep hold of her, and if it weren't so horrible I would be proud of the fight she's putting

“Shhh, Ella, it's alright. You're safe. You're safe now.” However her sightless eyes and

desperate cries make me think this isn't the first time she's fought this way, and I find myself holding back tears as I finally dig my fingers into a pressure point at the base of her throat, stealing her consciousness.

Little by little, Ella fades into a forced sleep, her body finally going limp in my arms. When it's over I slump onto the ground, gathering her precious form in my lap and pressing my hand to her belly. Our babe is whole and unharmed, but severely distressed. I try to send waves of comfort through our bond, beginning to purr again, but I think he can feel my own guilt and misery. He settles slightly, but pulses of anxiety continue to surge through our bond, as well as flashes of the fear and anguish Ella felt during the attack.

I don't stay there long, too worried about Ella catching hypothermia to give into my own body's demands for rest. However for the moment that I do remain, I wonder how it ever came to this: Naked, slumped on the ground surrounded by dead bodies, cradling the mother of my child in my arms and weeping my apologies into her neck.

I have to get her home. I have to make sure she's alright. But as soon as I know Ella and the baby are okay, I'm going to find and kill the person responsible for this.

#Chapter 68 – Aftermath

Sinclair

“Dominic?” My beta, Hugo, stands behind me, watching me with a worried expression. “We need you in the war room.”

“I want to be here when she wakes up.” I insist, keeping my gaze locked on Ella. She's asleep in my bed, her small body curled beneath the covers. Her arms are bandaged from shoulder to fingertip, and bruises dot her fair skin in too many places to count.

Guilt ties my insides into knots just looking at them – some of those bruises were my doing, the results of my efforts to restrain her. Ella had remained unconscious as I carried her out of the forest, but when she woke, she fought me as hard as ever. The doctor was forced to give her a strong dose of a sleeping draft in order to treat her wounds, though he promised the potion would help break her shock.

“I understand, but we're still cleaning up the scene and we need to make sure no one finds out about this.” Hugo sighs. It was thanks to Ella's quick thinking and endurance that the attack happened so deep in the forest, far deeper than other couples would be running on the hunt. I was able to evacuate her on the opposite side of the park, free from the prying eyes of the pack or the media, and my men had immediately rushed in to clean up the bodies before they could be discovered. “Until we can prove the prince was behind it, rogue attacks will just make you look weak.”

“I am weak.” I state hoarsely, wallowing in more than a small amount of self-pity and loathing. “It’s my fault. I didn’t see them coming. I knew the Prince was plotting against us and I still didn’t see them coming.”

“That isn’t fair Dom.” Hugo growls, his voice very stern. “You can only prepare for so much. and none of us can foresee the future. I’m sure Ella doesn’t blame you.”

“Well she should.” I bite back, emotion clogging my throat. “You know, she was so

traumatized she couldn’t even recognize me? That our baby was beside itself after weathering all her fear?”

“I know.” Hugo confirms grimly. “But she’s heavily sedated. It will be some time before she wakes, and if you want to make her safe, then the best thing you can do for her is to come to the war room and deal with the fallout. Help us strategize against the Prince. We’ll place extra guards at her door.”

“Not at her door.” I correct, seeing the sense of his words even though I hate hearing logic at the moment. “I want them posted in here with her. And I’ll come to the war room, but there’s something I have to do first.”

“Dominic – ”

“If anyone has an inside track on the Prince’s plans, it’s my brother.” I interrupt, scrubbing a hand over my face. “We need intel if we’re going to effectively strategize and he has it.”

“Alright.” Hugo agrees. “Just try not to lose your temper. Murdering your brother isn’t the kind of PR we need right now.”

I huff a humorless laugh, “Spoil sport.”

The sun is rising over the mountains as I pull into Roger's driveway, taking measured breaths and conducting silent counting exercises to try and stay calm. In my current mood it wouldn't take much provocation for me to kill anyone who crosses my path, and Roger is more infuriating than most.

I slide from the car and stride up the garden path, urging my wolf to settle. No violence. Violence is bad. Just think how disappointed Ella would be. I know it's ironic that I'm urging myself not to resort to violence after the slaughter I committed last night, but that was different. I didn't have a choice then I do now.

The door swings open soon after I knock, and Roger's surprised face appears. He looks so genuinely shocked to see me, I actually contemplate whether he might not have been involved in the attack. Then again, my brother has always been a good actor.

"Dominic, to what do I owe the pleasure?" He drawls, making it clear that my visit is anything but pleasurable.

I push past him, knocking into his shoulder and forcing him back from the doorway as I go. "Were you involved?" I demand, my voice little more than a growl, "Did you know what he was planning?"

Roger blinks, "what are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Roger." I scowl, "I know you've been working with the Prince." He offers me a humorless laugh. "You're being paranoid, Dom."

"Bull," I snap, "You expect me to believe you just happened to turn up in the same back alley where Ella was being attacked in the middle of the night by coincidence? Or that the Prince

mysteriously discovered I haven't claimed Ella when you're the only person who has that information?"

"I think you're forgetting all your staff – your guards, your doctors, Hugo and Aileen." Roger counters smoothly.

"My people are loyal you are the only person who knew who also has a vendetta against me." I combat.

"That you know of." He intones ominously.

"Ella was almost killed last night." I thunder, "I understand you hating me, but how could you be so cruel to an innocent she-wolf!"

"Wait," Roger protests, visibly paling. "Back up, what happened last night?"

"Stop pretending you don't know!" The words burst from my chest in a vicious snarl, and I just barely hold onto my temper. Use your words Dominic! "I suppose you ran in to protect her the first time to try and earn her trust, but when that didn't work you decided to just sacrifice her to the rogues.

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about!" Roger shouts back, losing his own temper. On my life, Dominic, I had no idea there had been a second attack!"

"Why should I believe you?" I grumble, clenching and unclenching my fists.

Roger raises his hands, his mouth a thin line. To my surprise, he seems genuinely shaken, and

I wonder if I underestimated his interest in Ella. “Look, I admit I knew about the first attack in advance. The Prince planned on killing her outright, but I thought saving her might get me some leverage with her. I... I thought if she trusted me I could convince her to leave

you. “What, so you could have her for yourself?” I bite, fighting the urge to reel back. I’ve never known Roger to admit any of his misdeeds. He must truly like Ella.

“No.” Roger rolls his eyes, “Just so you would lose the campaign. And yes, I told the Prince she hadn’t been claimed, but I swear on my life, I was never going to let him hurt her. I didn’t know about last night.

“Do you really despise me so much?” I grind out, “That you would rather a tyrant take over the realm just to spite me? Do you have no concept of the damage he’ll do if he wins? The atrocities he’ll inflict?”

Roger’s face closes off, and I wonder if he truly was so blinded by his resentment of me that he never considered the consequences of his schemes. “I just wanted to hurt you Dom. I admit. I was being selfish.”

“Well I’ve got news for you,” I declare ferociously. “I plan on winning this campaign, and you can be with me or against me. But you need to decide, because if you continue to make yourself my enemy, I’m going to treat you as complicit to the Prince’s crimes.” Pacing I let my wolf flash in my eyes. “Further, if anything happens to Ella I will hold you personally responsible and I’m not talking exile, brother.”

“Is she okay?” He gulps.

“Physically, she’ll heal.” I respond, trying to keep the emotional from my voice. “I’m not so sure if she’ll be okay mentally.”

He flinches, and I wonder if he really does care for her. “Are you going to tell her what I did?”

“I should.” I answer gruffly, “But she’s been through enough already.” I start to turn away, before changing my mind and whirling back to face him, “You know she actually defended you to me? She feels for you, even though you’ve done nothing but try to hurt and manipulate her.”

Roger’s face draws tight, and I see a glimmer of something akin to shame on his features. “I didn’t know.”

“That’s how good she is. She’d be your ally if you let her.” I explain, “And instead you chose to terrorize her.”

“I’m sorry.” Roger professes, ashen-faced. “I know she’s good. I saw that in her from the beginning. I think that’s part of why I was so angry when you found her. You don’t deserve someone so pure.”

“It’s not my fault I was born stronger, Roger!” I state simply, disgusted at how broken our relationship has become over things that are not my fault. “Or that Mom sacrificed herself for me.”

He clears his throat, looking down at the ground. “It felt better, to blame you...” He confesses slowly, “Than to believe it was all for nothing.”

I’m both grief stricken and amazed to hear him speak this way. We’ve never connected like this before, and I know Ella is the reason we are now. “Well if you want to make it up to us, you can go back to the Prince and find out what he’s planning next.”

Roger raises his chin, looking thoughtful. “You want me to be a double agent?”

“It’s not about what I want. It’s about whether you want to let a madman take over the Kingdom. It’s about whether you want Ella and your nephew to live or die.”

“Alright.” He nods. “I’ll do it.”

#Chapter 69 – Sinclair Calls In an Expert

Sinclair

It’s mid-morning by the time I leave Roger’s house, and I dial Cora’s phone number, both because she needs to know about what happened, and because I need help caring for Ella. Despite the doctor’s promises, I’m worried that Ella won’t recover as quickly as he’s predicting and if anyone knows what to expect, her sister surely must.

“Mr Sinclair?” She sounds uncertain as she answers, as if she suspects her caller ID might be lying to her.

“Good morning, Cora.” I greet her, taking a deep breath. “I’m sorry to disturb you when you’re at work, but I’m calling with some bad news.”

I can feel the anxiety in her sharp intake of breath, and worry imbues her soft voice, “Is Ella okay? Is the baby?”

“They’re both at home resting.” I share, hoping this will assuage the worst of her fears. “But there was another attack last night.”

“Another one?” Cora squeaks, indignation bleeding into her voice as she continues. “I thought you were supposed to be this all powerful Alpha? You’re supposed to be keeping her safe! My

sister has known you for a month and she's already had people trying to kill her twice!"

I understand her outrage, and I agree with it completely. "I know. You have every right to be upset with me. I'm not very happy with myself right now... I failed her." I confess, exhaling heavily. "I'm not turning out to be a very good father so far."

"I..." Cora doesn't seem to know what to make of this. "Tsk," She clears her throat. "Well is she alright? Does she need anything?"

"She's a bit scraped up, but I'm afraid the worst damage was psychological. It wasn't like last time. She... she didn't recognize me afterwards." I wonder if the human can hear how upsetting I find this particular detail, but when she remains silent I forge on. "She's in a deep state of shock the doctor used the word dissociative, like she completely disconnected from her body to protect her mind."

Cora swears, but she doesn't sound surprised. "I'll leave work right now." She offers, "I can be there within a half hour."

"Wait." I advise, "She's been sedated and I'm not sure when she'll wake up." For a moment I debate whether or not I should voice my next thought. Ella hasn't spoken to me much about her childhood, but I know that she feels very protective of her sister. Moreover, I remember the way she acted after the attack in the alley, refusing to show her upset to Cora, insisting she was fine. "And... I don't want to sound insensitive because I know you love Ella and want to be with her, but I'm afraid if you're there she'll be so focused on not worrying you, that she'll try to pretend like nothing happened and ignore her own wellbeing."

Cora thinks about this for a minute. "You're probably right about that. Ella has always been the caretaker... she really doesn't know how to deal with having the tables turned on her."

“So I’ve learned.” I muse aloud. “So I think it would be best to give it a couple of days.”

“Alright.” Cora agrees, “But I can still help you. I know all her creature comforts, the things that soothe her best. I can send you a list.”

“That would be wonderful.” I express honestly, thankful I decided to make this call before Ella wakes. By the time she returns to consciousness I can have all her favorite things already on hand and ready to comfort her.

“But Sinclair –” Cora interrupts my thoughts.

“Please call me Dominic, Cora.” I correct gently.

“Dominic,” She repeats patiently. “It’s not my place to tell you the details... but I think should know,”

you

“Yes?” I prompt her, having a dreadful premonition that I don’t want to hear whatever it is she’s about to say.

“These attacks aren’t the first traumas Ella has endured at the hands of men.” She explains vaguely, and I both want to demand further explanations and forbid her from saying more. She went through a lot when we were still children... she endured some of it to protect me and the other kids.” Cora trails off for a moment, sounding positively miserable. My mind immediately floods with horrible images of Ella, even more sweet and innocent than she is now, suffering at the hands of the adults meant to care for her.

“You need to be prepared that she won’t just be dealing with the trauma of the attacks when she wakes – but all the bad memories they’ll have dredged up.”

“That’s why you weren’t surprised... when I told you she dissociated.” I guess, hating every word of this conversation. “You’ve seen this before.”

“Yes.” Cora confirms, sounding remorseful. “But you’re not wrong either. She wants to protect the people she cares about even when she’s in no state to do so.”

Something we have in common. I think bitterly.

“I

suppose it’s two sides of the same coin.” I say instead. “Whether she’s doing it to protect herself from the pain or put on a brave face for someone else, it’s still repressing the bad feelings.”

“Oh.” Cora murmurs, in the tone of someone having an epiphany.

“What?” I inquire, not liking this one bit.

“Well when you put it that way... I wonder if maybe we’re wrong about it being for someone else.” Cora shares. “I mean maybe that’s how it started, but at the end of the day it still means. she never learned how to cope with these things.”

A wave of understanding crashes into me. If Ella has only ever repressed the bad things in her life, it won’t matter if her sister is there or not, she’ll try to do the same with this because it’s all she knows. Only now do I realize that Ella didn’t just pretend she was fine with Cora after the first attack. She might have come to me for safety, but she was a hollow shell as I tended her wounds, and when I encouraged her to share her feelings she distracted me with an argument. She never even cried about the attack, only my deception.

Ffuuucckk. I think, furious with myself for missing this, for letting the wiley minx outwit me.

“So what do I do?” I ask, hoping Cora will have the answer.

“Well I’ve never been able to refuse Ella anything when she’s hurting.” Cora remarks, sounding disheartened, “Especially not when it’s my fault. Which means I’ve never called out her avoidance, I’ve just... well, I think I’ve enabled her letting her tell me what she wants and never questioning or pushing back on whether it’s healthy.”

”

It seems like Cora and I have more in common than I realized. It also seems she’s sharper than I gave her credit for, as I’m receiving her message loud and clear. I might be blaming myself for putting Ella in danger, but I can’t let that guilt me into coddling her. “But you’re an Alpha.” She elaborates. “So maybe you’ll be able to do what I never could – and not let her get away with pretending everything is fine.”

“You can count on it.” I nod, taking this mission to heart. Ella is my responsibility, and it’s in my blood to take care of my pack. She might be human, but Ella is pack now, and I know her in some ways her sister certainly doesn’t. I also know a thing or two about helping stubborn she-wolves find catharsis and from what I’ve seen, Ella will be no different.

“Thank

you for telling me, Cora.” I profess genuinely. “And thank you for the advice. I’ll call you as soon as Ella is ready for visitors.”

“Good luck.” Cora offers, “and just let me know if you need anything else.”

“I will.” Hanging up, I realize that talking with Ella’s sister has completely changed my expectations for what the next few hours hold. I was prepared for Ella to wake up in another fog or to come

home to a basket case, but if the doctor is right and she's lucid I'll probably be dealing with one very obstinate little human in total denial.

When Cora's email hits my inbox, listing out all of Ella's favorite foods, music, films, and amenities, I make a detour to the store. Stocking up on candles, essential oils, bubble bath, fancy scrubs and masks, dark chocolate, flowers and various groceries, I plan out exactly how I'll set up my rooms once I get home. I'm hoping I can get everything done before Ella wakes, and also praying we're wrong about Ella's propensity to bury her traumas.

However I know my prayers haven't been answered as soon as I walk into my rooms and discover that Ella is not only wide awake, but standing in the middle of the room instructing her dressmaker to sew sleeves onto her ballgown to cover her bandages. In the midst of all the excitement I actually forgot the masquerade was tonight but Ella, it seems, did not.

She smiles at me in greeting, but I can only glare in return. "What in the Goddess's name do you think you're doing?"

#Chapter 70 – Ella Loses her Temper

Ella

I woke up in a thick haze of confusion, feeling as though I've been run over by a truck, but not remembering why. Muscles I didn't even know I possessed are screaming at me, demanding ice packs and pain killers, and I have a thumping headache. For a moment I wonder if I somehow have a hangover, recalling the groggy morning afters I used to experience following nights out on the town.

Slowly the memories trickled in: the wild hunt taking a horrible turn; the chasing me in the forest; my near scrape with hypothermia; and fighting for my life while

rogue wolves knowing it will all be over once they catch me. When I reach the point where I'm reliving being trapped in the boulders, feeling their claws ripping into my skin as I try to hold them off, I rush to the bathroom.

Emptying my stomach into the toilet for reasons that have nothing to do with my pregnancy and everything to do with the sheer terror I feel, I collapse on the tiles and try to force the horrible memories from my brain.

Other unwelcome images crowd into my thoughts even as I struggle to bury this most recent horror, ghosts from my past seeing an opportunity to rear their terrible heads. Breathing deeply, I force them back into the iron safe in the back of my mind, shoving the memories of last night inside with them. It isn't easy, but I'm well practiced at stowing unpleasant things away like this, protecting myself from their torment. When the work is done, I feel dazed and numb, but that's better than wallowing in agony.

Pulling myself up off the floor, I study my bandaged arms in the mirror, realizing they'll clash with my ball gown's off-the-shoulder cut. I call the dressmaker first thing, asking her to hurry to my side. The morning papers tell me that the bloody events of my first wild hunt went undetected from the media and the general public, but today is the Solstice itself it's more important than ever that Sinclair and I make a strong showing.

The dressmaker arrives shortly, surprising my guards who apparently didn't realize I was awake. She suggests tight-fitted sleeves the same color as my flesh, to disguise my bandages without compromising the gown's design, and also offers to sew

me a pair of matching gloves to help hide my injuries. I agree and she quickly makes the adjustments. By early afternoon the gown is complete, and I'm standing in front of the mirror studying the effect.

When Sinclair barges in halfway through the fitting, I'm expecting him to compliment my quick thinking. I smile at him, feeling proud of my efforts, but he only glares. "What in the Goddess's name do you think you're doing?"

His growling voice sends a shiver down my spine, but I summon a soft chuckle. "Well I can't very well go to the ball looking like a mummy." I answer, nodding towards my white bandages.

Sinclair stalks forward, dismissing the dressmaker with a curt "Leave us." Once the door closes behind her, he bears down on me, towering above me with a foreboding expression on his handsome face. "Ella you're not going to the ball."

"I'm sorry, are you auditioning to be my evil step mother?" I quip, astonished by his

anger.

apparent

"This isn't a joke." Sinclair informs me sternly. "A few hours ago you were bloody catatonic."

"I'm better now." I shrug, turning back to the mirror and pretending I don't see his thunderstruck expression. "I felt a bit groggy from all the doctor's drugs at first, but that passed ages ago."

Sinclair shakes his head, muttering in something akin to disbelief. "Goddess, Cora was right." "Right about wh-" I begin, processing his words too late. As soon as I do I turn on him, understanding slamming into me. "You called Cora? You told her? Why would

you do that?!” “Because she’s your sister, she loves you and she had a right to know you were hurt.” He declares, turning me back towards the mirror and unzipping my gown. I try to wrench away from him but it doesn’t work.

“Dominic stop!” I insist, backing out of his reach and clutching the garment to my chest. “You should have talked to me before calling Cora. It wasn’t necessary to upset her.”

“At least one of you is upset!” He exclaims, baffling me completely.

“What on earth is wrong with you?” I demand, feeling my annoyance devolve into outrage.” Why are you being like this?”

“Well to start with, the mother of my pup was almost killed last night but you’re pretending like nothing happened!” Sinclair bursts. I feel a familiar rush of disappointment to be reduced to ‘the mother of his pup’, but I’m not surprised.

“I’m not denying it happened,” I correct him simply. “But it wasn’t a big deal. You’re fine, I’m fine. It was scary in the moment but it all turned out okay.”

I can see Sinclair wants to reach for me, to grab me and turn me to face him, but he’s obviously wary of touching my wounds. Instead he circles in front of me, again imposing on my personal space with his big body. “Ella nothing about this situation is okay!” He asserts firmly, searching my face for signs that his words are sinking in and becoming even more upset when they don’t. “And I don’t believe for one second that you are as unaffected by all this as you’re pretending.”

“I’m not pretending.” I insist. “I know you think I’m this fragile thing, but I’m not, Dominic.” He sighs, wearing the beleaguered

expression of someone at his wits end. “It isn’t fragile or weak to be affected by a near death experience, Ella.”

“I know that.” I inform him stubbornly, “That isn’t what I meant, just that you want me to behave according to your expectations... but everyone handles trauma differently.”

“Well if I thought you were handling it, I wouldn’t care what method you chose.” Sinclair grumbles. “What bothers me is seeing you ignore it.”

“So what, you want me to be upset?” I inquire, aghast. “Why, so you can rush in and play the hero?”

“Of course I don’t want you to be upset!” He rumbles, catching my waist. “But I also don’t want you hurting yourself by repressing your feelings. These things don’t just go away, Ella, if you don’t let them out they fester and grow toxic inside of you.”

I notch my chin up, my own blood beginning to boil now. “I have the rest of my life to process what happened, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let the Prince win this campaign. Don’t you think he wants us to stay home and lick our wounds?” I demand, surprising myself with the force of my convictions.

I want to convince Sinclair not to coddle me, but I also want to make the Prince pay for trying to harm my unborn child. “He shouldn’t get away with what he did last night! I don’t care what he does to me, but I won’t stand for him trying to kill our baby.”

“Well you should care what he does to you!” Sinclair explodes, pacing in front of me and looking as though he can’t decide whether to be annoyed or impressed with my defiance. “And your wellbeing is more important than showing him up.”

“That’s your opinion. “I hiss, crossing my arms over my chest. “I disagree.”

Sinclair narrows his eyes, pulling my body flush against his and letting me feel the full weight of his disapproval. “We’re not going to the ball, Ella.” He declares, his fingers digging into my tender flesh. “We’re going to talk about this whether you like it or not.”

“You can’t make me.” I combat, my lip curling with disdain, “And I don’t need you to make me feel better, because I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t.” Sinclair insists, seeming resigned but determined as he looms over me. “I know, because I’m not and it didn’t even happen to me.”

“Just stop it!” I shout, fighting back tears. Why won’t he let this go? Why won’t he just let me deal with it in my own way? I can feel myself spiraling out of control. I can feel the bad feelings hammering against the locked door in my mind, encouraged by Sinclair’s warmth and understanding. Something inside me wants to cave to his dominance, but I can’t let that happen. I can’t release all that darkness – it will swallow me whole. “I’ve made up my mind!” “Have you even cried, Ella?” Sinclair continues, stalking me across the room. “Have you let yourself feel what they did to you?”

“I said stop it!” I repeat, pushing at his broad chest, “Just leave me alone!”

“I’m not going to do that, baby.” He states gravely, continuing to pursue me.

“Of course not!” I accuse, “You pretend you’re doing this for me but really you’re helping yourself. You don’t care what I want.”

“I do, but what you want and what you need aren’t always the same.” Sinclair says, repeating the same Alpha nonsense he’s been preaching from day one.

Before I can stop myself, I'm surging forward, fueled by a strange and reckless courage. "I am so sick of your condescending bullshit," I cry, smacking his hands away, "You're a wolf so you get to boss me around, you're a man so you know what I need better than I do well I don't accept that!"

My feeble swats, pushing back against his attempts to console me, grow more and more desperate, until I lash out with all my strength and strike Sinclair across the face. A loud clap rings through the air, and only too late do I realize what I've done. Sinclair's wolf blazes to life in his eyes, and I can only whimper, turn tail and run.