

Accidental Surrogate For Alpha By Caroline Above

#Chapter 71 – Ella Gets a Lesson in Catharsis

Ella

Every instinct I possess is telling me to get away from Sinclair as fast as I can, but he catches me around the waist before I can move two feet. I know I've made a terrible mistake, and I don't have any idea where the impulse to strike him came from. I've never raised a hand against anyone in my life, and certainly not a man as dangerous as Sinclair – a predator who could snap me up in one bite.

When I'm yanked to a stop in his arms, I panic. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it, I don't know what happened." I exclaim, squirming despite my injuries. He lugs me up against his chest, keeping my body flush against him.

Sinclair emits a dark chuckle, and I realize he hasn't lost his temper. Far from it, he's entirely in control, but he's also not going to let me get away with hitting him. "Tsk, sweet Ella, I know exactly what happened." He purrs, "but you're not sorry not yet anyway." His lips graze my ear, his deep voice turning my insides to jelly, "But you will be."

"Dominic please – I beg, squirming in his arms, desperately trying to free myself from his grasp.

"I warned you, little one. This was your last strike." He answers coolly, "Now stop wriggling before you hurt yourself."

At once I'm struck by the difference I feel being trapped in his arms. If one of those rogues had caught me, I would have been too afraid to anger them to risk rebelling. After all, I've experienced the dreadful paralysis that occurs when you're too

terrified to fight back against an attacker more than once. Yet I feel no such fear with Sinclair. I know he means to punish me, and yet I feel completely safe.

The ball gown is stripped from my body, and Sinclair settles on the bed, laying my body face down over his lap. "What are you doing?" I whimper, trying to rear up.

One of Sinclair's massive palms settles at the base of my spine, holding me in place as his free hand traces the curve of my bare bottom. "What do you think I'm doing?" He inquires, sounding as though he's taking far too much pleasure in this.

"You can't be serious!" I protest, "This is barbaric! I'm not a child!"

"You're right." Sinclair croons, still grazing his fingers over my skin and making the bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs swell and plump with rushing blood. "you're not a child, which means you should know better than to throw tantrums and strike people."

"But I'm pregnant," I remind him, hoping he'll take mercy. "You could hurt the baby."

"Trust me sweetheart, if spankings harmed unborn pups my kind would have died out a long time ago." Sinclair drawls, massaging the tense muscles of my lower back. "Breeding she-wolves need to feel their mate's dominance more than anyone else." 2

The word "spanking" echoes in my mind, almost as if it's some foreign term from another language. I know exactly what it means, but it seems impossible that I could truly be in this predicament. I've known plenty of punishments in my time, but none like this. None from someone who actually cares about me, and none that excite me despite my better judgment.

“Well that’s fine for you and your twisted were friends, but I’m not into that sort of thing!” I insist, trying to ignore the flames engulfing my body. I can feel myself growing wet already, and I’m horrified when Sinclair scents the air, a satisfied rumble sounding in his chest. Surely he can’t smell my arousal? Right?

“Is that the story you want to stick with, Ella?” Sinclair questions, amusement heavy in his velvety tones as his fingers dip dangerously close to my swollen sex. No, no, no. I think. It’s too embarrassing! I’m sure I’ve never been this turned on in my life – but what does that say about me? What’s wrong with me that I like this?

I whine, trying to jerk out of his reach. “This isn’t fair, you’re not the boss of me!” Why am I still provoking him? Why am I not begging for mercy?

“We’ll just see about that.” Sinclair intones, still massaging my backside. Belatedly I realize he’s warming my skin, preparing me for his discipline. When the first swat finally lands, I rear up, crying out in protest. I’m sure Sinclair is only using a fraction of his strength, but it still hurts. Even so, I know my reaction is more outrage than actual pain.

I kick my legs and beat my fists against Sinclair’s thighs, but he easily restrains me. This is so confusing, how can I feel safer being confined by his strong arms than I did when I was lashing out wildly? He lands another swat, on the opposite cheek this time spreading the heat over my raised buttocks equally. He starts slowly, continuing to warm my skin until I’m accustomed to the sting, and then increasing his efforts.

I fight like a hellcat, furious that he’s doing this and yet more turned on than I can ever remember being. Something is wrong with me. I decide. Only someone deeply disturbed would enjoy this. He’s actually spanking me, like I’m a naughty child instead of

the mother of his baby. The worst part is his deliciously dirty words, telling me what a bad girl I've been, scolding me for my misbehavior and yet praising my arousal – telling me how natural it is, how delicious I smell.

He doesn't let up until I stop trying to escape his hold, until I submit to his discipline and let go of my own control. When his relentless swats finally slow, I catch myself undulating, raising my

bottom to meet his hand. With considerable effort, I force myself to still. "Is it over?" I ask miserably, trying to sound as pitiful as possible.

"On any other occasion it would be," Sinclair shares, sounding resigned now. "But you need to cry, Ella. You need to deal with the attack."

"But I don't want to." I moan, feeling very immature now.

"It's okay, I'm going to help you." Sinclair promises, stroking my spine. "And afterwards I promise I'll make you feel good."

"No, please... I don't want to cry." I confess, my voice very small now.

"Why not?" Sinclair asks. "What's so terrible about crying?"

Sniffling, I pluck up the courage to tell him my fears. After all the man just spanked me, if I can be honest with anyone, it's him. "I'm afraid if I start I won't be able to stop. I don't want to hurt."

Sinclair clucks sympathetically, clearly understanding that I'm not talking about physical pain. "I'll be with you the whole time." He promises. "I'm not going to let you face it alone."

I try to resist my instincts to submit as long as I can, holding myself tense as the swats rain

down on my upturned bottom, growing sharper and more delectable with every volley. I might have been able to resist if it weren't for Sinclair's encouragement. Now instead of telling me how naughty I've been he keeps insisting it's alright, that I'm safe and he'll take care of me.

It doesn't take much then, a few good swats and I collapse into Sinclair's arms, sobbing out my anguish into his legs until he pulls me up into his lap. I wince and hiss when my sore backside meets with his thighs, but he kisses and croons and rocks me as I work through the pain, and soon I forget about the indignity and outrage of my spanking

"I'm Sorry I was such a brat." I confess, nuzzling my face against his chest and breathing in

his scent.

"I love your every mood." Sinclair assures me, "you never need to apologize for being yourself."

I shake

my head. "When you say things like that I think you're too good to be true." I admit. "I don't trust it."

"That's okay." Sinclair affirms. "I'm not going to be scared off because you're a bit skittish, Ella. You're giving me an heir I'm in this for the long haul."

My heart sinks at the reminder he's only doing this because I'm carrying his son, but I feel so cozy in Sinclair's arms that I can't bring myself to protest. He continues petting and cuddling me until my tears slow, though my rear end is still on fire. I've never known so many conflicting feelings.

I've been thoroughly punished, confronted my trauma and grief, and yet I'm also beside myself with lust. In fact, my desire is the only thing Sinclair has yet to satisfy, and I'm all too aware he vowed to take care of that as well.

As if he's reading my mind, Sinclair slides his hand between my legs, feeling my sodden core and purring with approval. "Now, would you like me to make you feel good?"

#Chapter 72 – Ella have a deal

Ella

Yes, yes, yes! The little voice in my head chants, so forcefully the words almost spill out of my mouth. I stop them just in time, even though I can't stop my hips from jerking up towards Sinclair's hand. Still, I manage to clasp my fingers around his wrist before he can make contact with my aching clit, even as my blood sings for release.

I desperately want to let Sinclair's give me the pleasure he's offering, but I feel so overwhelmed by all this. Too many things have happened in the last 24 hours, and I'm beyond confused by my reaction to Sinclair's discipline. All my emotions have been thrust together, smashed up and blended into a violent, swirling maelstrom- too muddled to differentiate. It's as though I've been completely unmoored, no long understanding my own heart or mind.

I look up at Sinclair, my eyes wide and still stinging with leftover tears. He's wearing that ravenous expression that makes me feel like he's about to gobble me up, but there's a softness in his eyes an understanding that my body's base instincts are not on the same page with my distraught mind.

"I don't think I'm ready for that. "I confess, my voice very soft. How surreal is it, four hours ago I was ready to give myself to him completely? To let him make love to me right that twenty there in the middle of the forest, despite all our efforts to keep our relationship platonic?"

Maybe the Prince did us a favor with his attack, I think bitterly. He kept us from taking a step we wouldn't be able to take back from making a terrible mistake.

How can you say that? My conscience demands. Look at what Sinclair just did for you.

What? Spank me like a child? Make me cry like a baby? I bite back.

You know you feel better now, The infuriating voice replies, It hurts, but hurting is better than feeling nothing.

I'm not so sure about that. The feelings that flowed out of me after the spanking provided an entirely different kind of release than the one I need now, pouring out pent up emotions with no other outlet than tears. However I'm acutely aware that those feelings were only a drop in the bucket, the surface waters of a bottomless well of anguish I am not prepared to face.

Ignoring my conscience, I peek up at the huge Alpha. "Is that okay?"

"Ella, of course it's okay." Sinclair answers, studying me closely. "Do you want me to leave you, so you can take care of it yourself?" He offers, though there's a low, growly quality to his voice that makes me think his wolf doesn't like this idea one bit.

"No." I object immediately, grasping for his shirt before I can think better of it. I don't want him to leave, to lose his soothing touch- but I also have a sneaking suspicion that staying in his lap is a

bad idea. I can feel his hardness digging into my sore backside, and I'm both squirming to relieve the sting of my punished flesh and the ache between my legs.

"Easy sweetheart." Sinclair chuckles, "I'm not going anywhere." He kisses my hair. Then, seeming to sense the problem, he sets me beside him on the bed. I wince, preferring the feel of his warm thighs over the cool silk of the duvet, but before I can feel too sorry for myself Sinclair slides his palm to my bare belly, feeling for the pup.

"How is he?" I ask, feeling both guilty for not asking sooner, but also afraid of hearing the answer. How much of my ordeal was the pup able to feel? Surely if he can sense my feelings he can feel my fear and pain. Is he also aware that his father just put me over his knee? Oh that is so wrong – no child should have to know those things about their parents.

"I wish you could see your face right now." Sinclair teases, "But I promise he's much too young to understand any of this. All he knows is that you were sad, and that you feel better now we're together. He feels better too."

"Was he very frightened last night?" I inquire, closing my eyes and leaning into his side.

"He was distressed, because he could feel your fear, but everything he knows is in response to you. And his own feelings haven't become more complicated than sad or happy – they won't until after he's born." He explains.

"But you could tell what he was making me crave." I remind him, striving to understand.

Sinclair nods, "Hunger, pain, tiredness, those are all reflexive instincts, not emotions." I sigh, taking this in and pressing my

nose to his chest and breathing in his scent. "You see?" I can hear a smile in his voice. "You're soothed my scent, so he's happy.

"But I thought I liked smelling you because it's what he needs?" I murmur.

"That's the way with mothers and pups that's why I say you have a connection every bit as magical as my own. Your wants and needs become one in the same." Sinclair shares.

"Okay." I breathe, knowing that the harder I think about this, the less sense it will make. The more time that passes, the more I'm learning that magic and logic do not always mix.

We pass the next few moments in silence, and though I'm still so needy I think I might scream, I also haven't forgotten the reason we fought. My ball gown remains in a puddle on the floor, it's gauzy, gemstone studded skirts glinting up at me in the low lighting. Dominic?"

"Yes?" He prompts, running his fingers up and down my arm in the most distracting way. His touch is featherlight, and I know it's intended to comfort me rather than excite, but I'm beginning to think that it's impossible to be in physical contact with this man without being turned on. Hell, I was even turned on when he was spanking me and it hurt like hell. On some level I understand it was his dominance I liked, rather than the pain, but it still seems so wrong.

"I think I need you to stop touching me." I whisper, hating myself even as I say it.

"Okay." He agrees, reluctantly shifting my small body away from his. I instantly feel cold and incomplete, and my feelings must

show on my face because Sinclair laughs and taps his finger on my nose. "You asked for it, beautiful."

"I know." I complain, pulling the duvet up around me so that I won't feel so exposed. Sinclair watches my movement with narrowed eyes, and I can see he's holding back some bossy statement. Probably something about not hiding myself from him, though he seems to understand I won't calm down as long as his gaze is raking over my naked skin. "I want to talk about the ball."

"Ella-

"No!" I insist, cutting him off, "Please just hear me out?"

Sinclair exhales heavily, "Go ahead."

"Look, you were obviously right that I wasn't okay," I begin, feeling resigned. "But I wasn't wrong either. We can't let the Prince win."

"We're not." Sinclair promises. "But you need your rest. You've been through a lot."

"I've been through worse." I announce, surprising us both. I didn't intend on sharing that with Sinclair, but I need him to know I'm not going to fall to pieces at the first sign of danger. He doesn't look surprised, he merely grimaces, as if he hates hearing this but also wants to ask for more details. Sensing this, I forge ahead before he can act on his impulse. "You made such a big deal about the Solstice, about how much these events mean. If we skip it, the Prince will have an advantage."

"The Prince doesn't have a breeding mate." Sinclair counters, "pregnant she-wolves get a lot more free passes in our society than those who are not."

"But he'll know." I state stubbornly. "He'll feel emboldened, like his plan is working. We have to show him it isn't."

Sinclair studies me for a long moment. “Is this truly what you want, or are you trying to prove something to me because I promise you don’t have to.”

“Not everything is about you, you know.” I answer saucily, feeling a bit more of myself now. Warmth floods my body at the sound of his laughter. “Careful little one, or I might think you didn’t learn your lesson the first time.”

“Please Dominic?” I request. “I want to go to the ball.”

“Hmm.” He hums thoughtfully. “If I agree, will you do something for me in return?”

“That depends,” I answer warily. “What do you want?”

“Will you promise to tell me about those worse things you’ve been through some day?” Sinclair inquires, grazing his knuckles over my cheek.

I go very still now. “I’ve never talked about those things with anyone. I’m not sure I know how.”

“I could help you.” Sinclair offers, “Like I helped you today.”

“If you think I’m going to let you spank me again – “I begin indignantly.

“Oh so you let me, did you?” He rumbles, sliding his hand around to my nape and making my toes curl. He grins wolfishly, shaking his head. “I hate to break it to you, baby but that was far from your last spanking, whether it’s to help you tap into your feelings or not.”

“You’re a tyrant, you know that?” I remark, shooting him a sullen glare.

“Is that a no?” He asks, arching a brow.

“But why bothering digging into all of that?” I question. ‘It’s in the past. Surely it’s better to leave it there.’”

“I think we both know these things never stay in the past, Ella.” Sinclair answers gravely. “I could see them weighing on you before you ever said a word.”

“You could?” I squeak, hating to think I’m so transparent.

“Yes.” He affirms gently, “And I don’t want you carrying all that alone.”

“But it’s my burden to carry, not yours.” I reason, not looking him in the eye.

Sinclair catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger, pulling my eyes up to his. “And I suppose you asked to carry it? You sought out the pain and heartache?”

I can see his point, though I don’t want to. I can also see the advantage in keeping this deal some vague promise of the future. The ball is tonight, so I can agree to share and then put off following through indefinitely. It’s not a lie – not really. I know I’m not ever going to be ready to talk about those horrible things with Sinclair, so I just have to tell him as much when the time comes.

“Okay.” I finally confirm. “You have a deal.”

#Chapter 73 – The Masquerade

Sinclair

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask, studying Ella.

Her golden eyes sparkle up at me. “Yes Dominic, for the thousandth time.” She sasses, “I’m sure.”

I chuckle, dropping a kiss to her hair. "Imp."

We're in the back of a limousine as it rolls slowly down the street, lined on all sides by clambering pack members eager to catch a glimpse of the shifter elite on their way to the King's palace. Ella is tucked safely against my side, wearing an off the shoulder deepest green.

gown of

Layer upon layer of sheer fabric winds around her body in graceful tendrils, leaving small flashes of her fair skin bared and outlining her feminine figure in the most tantalizing design, before cascading to the ground in a waterfall of chiffon. Amber gemstones glitter in her skirts, perfectly matching the delicate jewels of her necklace and earrings. Her hair has been piled up on top of her head, save for a few wisps left free, and her small feet are confined in a pair of sky high heels. Her mask is resting in her lap, waiting for the moment we'll exit the car and don the intricate disguises required for the ball. Every time I look at her my lungs stop pumping, and I have to remind myself to breathe, struggling to remember how it's done. "I know you don't like being told how beautiful you are, but sometimes it's hard for me to keep it to myself." I sigh, leaning down to nuzzle her neck and bask in her sweet scent.

Ella tilts her head to the side, giving me more room to work as I brush my nose and lips over her skin. "It's not that I mind compliments," Her breath hitches when I pause to nibble the place where her neck meets her shoulder. "I just don't like being made to feel like that's all I

am."

"Well you

don't have to worry there, because as lovely as you are, your beauty is my least favorite thing about you." I remark, completely serious.

"Sure it is." She giggles, the sound filling my body with pure sunshine.

"I mean it." I reply honestly, "Of course, it's not like that means much because I like all of you. Talking about my least favorite part is like talking about my least favorite dessert at the end of the day it's still dessert."

—

She doesn't answer, and when I finally stop exploring the silky curve of her throat, I find a guarded expression on her face, as if she's waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Would you like to know my favorite thing about you?" I prompt, offering what she's either too afraid or too shy to ask.

"I don't know." She shrugs, not looking me in the eye.

"Hmm," I purr, enjoying the way her tightly wound little body immediately melts against mine. "It's that warrior heart of yours."

Ella snorts, finally raising her luminous gaze to mine. "No one has ever mistaken me for a warrior before." She admonishes. "I think you're just trying to flatter me now."

"It's no mistake." I rumble sternly, not liking her self-deprecating tone. "I know warriors, and I know you. You have a heart that cannot be quelled – you love fiercely, and you don't give up."

Ella blushes, her cheeks growing so pink that I want to whisper all my secret desires in her ear, just to see how deeply I can make

her flush. She peeks up at me from beneath her lashes. “Do you want to know my favorite thing about you?”

“Tell me,” I invite, not caring one bit whether her answer is about my looks or personality- as long as she has a favorite thing, she could tell me she likes my big toe and I’d still be grateful

“You listen.” Ella shares softly. “Not because you think you should or that it’s the right thing to do but because you want to. You want to understand, and you want your people to be happy.”

I can’t stop myself from kissing her, even if it’s only a brief graze of our lips. “I want you to be happy too, Ella.” I tell her, “I know that might feel impossible right now, with everything you’ve been through, but I’m going to make our family safe. And once I do I’m going to spoil you and the baby rotten.”

Her eyes widen slightly when I say, “our family,” and I realize I’ve never talked about us that way. However the more time that passes, the more obvious it becomes to me that Ella and I will be family. Whether we become romantically involved or not, we’re going to share a pup and that will tie us together for life. However, no sooner have I worked through these thoughts myself, than I see Ella’s expression transforming, taking on a decidedly devious glint

“Does that mean you won’t boss me around anymore?” The minx replies, alight with mischief and desire in equal measure. “You’ll let me walk all over you and get away with everything?”

I throw my head back, barking with laughter even as I fight the urge to tell the driver to turn the car around so I can take Ella home and finish what we started earlier. “Not even close, trouble.”

As the car pulls to a stop and we put on our masks, I glance at the media clamoring outside and feel Ella do the same. She recoils in surprise, and a rush or protectiveness slams into me. My wolf immediately rises to the surface, and I have to fight the urge to shift.

Let me out. My wolf demands. I'll kill them before they lay a hand on her.

Calm down! I insist, shaking with the effort of holding him back.

But they're scaring her! He insists. This was a mistake! It's too soon.

After last night I don't want to let anyone come near Ella, and her fear is forcing my possessive fury into overdrive. It's as though I see threats everywhere I look, and I'd like nothing more than to attack every reporter in sight. Deep down, I also know that I wouldn't be so on edge if we'd found an outlet for our sexual tension earlier. It goes against my every instinct not to reward my mate after she submitted so beautifully, and I feel as though my job is unfinished. Moreover, I wasn't able to take the edge off of my own desire and the need to claim her is suddenly so powerful I want to take her right here and now.

Mine, mine, mine. My wolf chants. I have to mark her.

No! I refuse ferociously. She's not a wolf, it would hurt her.

Just a nibble? He begs, She smells so delicious. 2

Somehow I manage to get Ella out of the car and through the crowd, but no sooner have we stepped into the ballroom that Ella turns toward me with an exasperated look on her face. Dominic, you're acting like a dog guarding a bone.

I arch my brows, letting some of my Alpha authority seep into my voice. “Am I now?”

—

Ella shivers, but doesn't back down. “You just growled that attendant – the poor man practically wet himself.” 1

“He came too close to you!” I growl defensively

“He was taking my coat.” Ella reminds me, sounding almost stern. “You've got to find a way to calm down.”

“I don't think I can.” I grumble, “The man who hired those rogues to kill you is here somewhere, no doubt plotting another attack.”

Ella frowns. “Is there nothing I can do to help? You told me mates are supposed to calm each other.”

I sigh and hold her tight so that she can't see my grimace.

“Sweetheart, the things you could do to help are not things we could do in public, nor are you ready for them.”

“Oh...” Ella's eyes go adorably wide as realization strikes. I watch her work through the implications of my words, and without a single word of help, she comes to the correct conclusion. “Would it still be this way, if I'd... if we'd... you know after?” She trails off, blushing

“After your spanking?” I supply.

Ella's blush turns crimson, and she leans forward impatiently.

“Shhh!” Looking around to make sure no one overheard me, she agrees, “Yes.”

“It would have helped me take the edge off, but – ”

Before I can finish the sentence, Ella gives me a fierce glare and a delectable pout. “You should have told me, I can still-”

She’s about to offer something I might not be able to turn down, so I stop her, softening the force of my growl at the last moment. “No, this was always going to be the case, Ella. I don’t like you being here with all these wolves after what happened last night. If I had my way I would have kept you at home in bed until this campaign is over.”

“Then maybe...” she pulls my hand to her tummy, and the tiny bump hidden by her skirts. “ Maybe just feel the baby. Feel how secure we are in your arms, how safe I feel with you. Nothing’s going to happen, and I promise to stay close.”

Warmth washes over me, and I smile down at the precious bundle in my arms, amazed that she seems to know exactly what to say to help me, despite not understanding so much about our kind. However, no sooner have I started to relax, than the Prince enters, He scans the room until his eyes land on Ella and I, then crosses the floor – heading straight towards us.

#Chapter 74 – Dancing with the Prince

Ella

As soon as the Prince catches sight of Sinclair and I, his eyes flash with obvious rage. I can tell he’s surprised to see us here, though he must have known I survived the hunt. When none of his rogues returned to confirm my death, he would have immediately realized what

happened. Still, I’m sure he expected Sinclair to do exactly what he just suggested, and keep me home at all costs.

Despite his fury, the Prince quickly covers his emotions and stalks toward us. I can feel Sinclair vibrating with dangerous energy, and

I lean into him, letting him feel my warmth and breathe in my scent. He's making low grumbly sounds, though not the kind he often makes when he's kissing or scent marking me, which let me know his wolf is pleased. These are very different: sharp and vicious, hinting at barely contained aggression.

"It's okay." I whisper. "He can't do anything here."

"I'll kill him." Sinclair snarls under his breath. "You need to leave, before this gets ugly."

I can tell Sinclair is no longer in control and I know his wolf is urging him to protect the baby even if it costs him the campaign. Of course, killing the Prince would get rid of the

competition, but I don't think it would comprise very good optics for a future King. I don't understand enough about shifter society to know for sure, but my instincts are telling me that a death match on one of the most sacred days of the year is a bad idea.

"I'm not going anywhere." I answer firmly, digging in my heels.

"Ella, I wasn't asking." Sinclair snaps, pinning me with his most intimidating gaze.

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I feel the sudden urge to cower before the predator towering over me, but I can't bring a pup into the world without Sinclair, and I'm not going to risk him being thrown in jail or exiled. "You can threaten me and punish me however you like." I remark coolly, pretending that my knees haven't completely turned to jelly. "But I promised not to leave your side, and I meant it."

Sinclair's powerful arm squeezes my waist, pulling me even closer against him even though our bodies were already flush. He drops his lips to my ear. "This is not the time to test me, little human."

Before I can respond, the Prince appears in front of us. Acting on instinct, I start to pull away from Sinclair, forcing him to pull me back and keep his hands occupied holding me in place, rather than ripping the Prince to shreds. "Happy Solstice, Dominic," The Prince greets, before turning his wolfish gaze to me. "Ella. You're looking very well."

Another growl rends the air between us, but I move directly in front of Sinclair, making a human barrier between the wolves with my body. I lean my back into Sinclair's chest, encouraging him to wrap his arms around me and rest his palms over the baby. "Thank you." I smile, trying to sound genuine. "We're so pleased to be here though I'm afraid our masks. didn't do much to disguise us." I laugh falsely.

Sinclair is muttering a steady litany of threats in my my head, using his connection with the baby to make his voice echo in my mind. He compliments me even as he promises to punish me for my interference, and I reach back to run my fingers through his silky hair, soothing

him even though I'm making myself the target of his outrage. You're in so much trouble, you magnificent, fearless little angel. What are you thinking?

"Ah well, it's hard to go incognito when you're as famous as you two." The Prince grins, creating a conniving, cruel expression. "It seems like I can't open the newspaper these days without seeing you two staring back at me."

I shrug gently, an audience is forming around us, drawn in by the magnetic pull of watching two competing alphas. "It's amazing isn't it? You'd think people would have gotten bored of us by now,"

You're too clever for your own good. Dominic is saying, making it very difficult for me to focus on the Prince's response. I need to make him pay for what he did. I need to kill him.

"Well there's no accounting for taste – especially among commoners." The Prince is snidely remarking.

"Forgive me," I answer boldly, speaking loudly enough for our onlookers to hear. "But

weren't

you a commoner until your father became King? It seems awfully callous to write off so many people just because they haven't been as lucky as you. After all, that's why you're in this position isn't it? Luck?" A stark murmur works through the crowd around us

When we get home I'm going to put you right back over my knee and this time I'm not going to let you get away without coming at least three times, you brilliant, impossible creature. At this point I press one of my stiletto's onto Sinclair's foot, needing him to shut up before I become so aroused that the entire room can smell my desire. Of course, he only responds with a low chuckle. That might work if you weighed more than a field mouse, little one. But that's okay I won't forget that you tried to stomp on me again.

"What interesting ideas your mate has, Dominic." The Prince comments, looking over my head to speak to Sinclair with barely contained rage. He obviously hates being shown up in public, but he's in the same position as Sinclair, trapped by convention. "I wonder if you might release her for a dance? I'd be very curious to speak with her further."

“I don’t think so.” Sinclair growls, before I can respond. “Ella is struggling with morning sickness, too much spinning on the dance floor might trigger it.”

Sighing, I tilt my face up to his, urging him to lower his ear to my mouth. I’m wishing I could speak to him through the baby, the way he does with me, but I also know that the more intimate we appear for the media, the better the reports will seem. “It’s okay.” I insist. “He won’t hurt me with you watching.”

No. He responds immediately. You’re mine, he can’t have you even for a dance.

“Dominic, he underestimates me. He thinks I’m a dumb commoner, I might be able to get information from him he wouldn’t admit to you.” I reason. “And it would look good to the council. I doubt they want it to appear like theres a risk of civil war between the Alphas.” I hate this. Sinclair complains in my head. I need you to be safe. I need him to be dead. “You need to win. The baby and I need you to win, and you can’t do that if we make a scene here.” I counter.

Goddess, damn it! The next thing I know, Sinclair has spun me to face him. His mouth claims mine with urgent need, drawing a whimper from my lips as I open for his questing tongue. I’m sure the Prince is still standing behind us, impotently waiting for us to reach a decision.

We pay him no mind. Instead I let Sinclair ravish me for all to see, stealing kiss after kiss from my swollen mouth and nibbling my neck before he releases me. I’ll be right here. If you need me, just send me a look, and I’ll be there.

“I promise.” I confirm, “I’ll ask for help if I need it.”

You better! Sinclair claims once last kiss before letting me go, glaring at the Prince over my head. "Make it quick."

I turn and accept the Prince's outstretched hand, shaking off Sinclair when he doesn't immediately release me. Gradually he does, though I can see him in my periphery, following our progress as we move onto the dance floor.

"Dominic is very protective of you." The Prince observes, glancing at the wolf currently stalking us.

"Aren't you protective of your mate?" I reply. "I thought all Alphas were that way all true Alphas that is."

The Prince's wolf glows in his eyes, and I know I've struck a chord. I'm not sure where I found the courage to question his dominance. Maybe it's the baby, or maybe Sinclair is rubbing off on me either way it's difficult to be afraid of the Prince when I spend all my time with a man who is ten times more powerful.

"Hmph." The Prince murmurs, barely containing his ire. "I suppose."

We move through the dance for a few moments, and I try not to pay attention to Sinclair. I try to focus on the steps and not make a fool of myself, but I'm painfully conscious of the emerald eyes glued to my back.

"You know – I had my investigators look into you." The Prince declares abruptly, as if he's talking about running an errand rather than invading my privacy

"Did you?" I counter, making an effort to sound nonchalant. However the little voice in my head is struggling not to panic. If his investigators searched for me in the Bloodbane pack, they won't have found anything. And if they searched for me here, they might

have discovered my true identity. “And tell me, what did you find?”

“Well, it’s the strangest thing.” The Prince replies, suddenly looking like a hunter going in for the kill. “They didn’t find anything. Not a single thing.”

#Chapter 75 – The Prince Slips Up

Ella

As the Prince and I move around the dance floor, I’m only too conscious that every eye in the room is on us. Of course, none of those eyes weigh on my shoulders so heavily as Sinclairs. I’m working hard not to accidentally send him any signals that I need to be rescued, but it isn’t easy – especially after the Prince just confronted me with one of the many lies I’ve been telling.

“That’s not surprising.” I bluff. “I lived a quiet life before coming here.”

“There’s quiet and then there’s nonexistent.” The Prince mutters bleakly. “And forgive me but I find it highly suspicious that you made absolutely no impact on your prior pack. After all – one would expect a she-wolf qualified to be Luna to have a high profile.”

my

parts of

“Believe it or not,” I begin, deciding to tell at least one truth tonight, “but I didn’t find strength until I met Dominic. He’s helping me recognize that my power was always there, but sometimes it takes seeing yourself through someone else’s eyes to appreciate the ourselves we take for granted. So, no I didn’t have a high profile in the Bloodbane pack.” 1 The Prince scoffs. “I wouldn’t be

so quick to admit that, Ella. Just imagine what the council would think if they knew.” His tone implies advice, but his eyes glint with an obvious threat. “I’ll gladly tell them myself.” I counter coolly, “I’m not ashamed of my past, and I think people need leaders who can be honest about their journeys. No one starts out in this world as a force of nature; they become one after being molded and weathered by the elements. Dominic and I are examples of how even the strongest of our kind become so through resilience and strife, as well as the people with whom you surround yourself not blind ambition.”

The Prince has been keeping his voice low, no doubt afraid of being overheard, but when I continue to speak at a volume guaranteeing others will hear our conversation, he loses his temper. “Would you keep your voice down?!”

“Why, don’t you want people to know our positions?” I counter, feeling an unfamiliar spike of adrenaline. Is this how hunters feel when they know they’re closing in? When they’ve got their target cornered. “Don’t you want them to be fully informed before the election?”

“That isn’t how things are done!” The Prince snaps, forgetting to whisper now.

“Well maybe it should be.” I answer coldly. “Why adhere to outdated traditions just because that’s the way things have always been done? Being done doesn’t mean they’re right or effective.”

The Prince growls, and I see the wolves around us rear back in shock. I know I have scant seconds before Sinclair will appear and snatch me away from the Prince so he can attack, so I offer the tyrant in front of me my widest smile, hoping it will convince Sinclair I can handle

this.

“See, this is exactly what I mean,” I beam, mildly surprised at how little fear I truly fear. ” Growling at breeding she-wolves half your size really seems like a practice that should have been left in the dark ages, don’t you think?”

The Prince glowers, abruptly stopping and yanking me close enough so he can hiss in my ear,

You dumb bitch, I don’t know how you survived last night, but mark my words, I’m going to get rid of you and that brat you’re growing one way or another. You should leave while you still can, if you stay I guarantee your days are numbered!”

His claws are digging into my bandaged arms, and I know I can’t give into my instincts to growl back at him. I don’t care if he’s threatening me, but the idea that he’s threatening my pup makes me want to rant and rage – to destroy him no matter the cost.

my

Any fear I might have once felt for myself has translated into primal protectiveness for child. The problem is that it might cost us the campaign – I know how important it is for me to continue looking calm and unintimidated by the Prince. If I let the people around us see my fear or anger I’ll lose the upper hand.

Luckily Sinclair appears in our path before I can lose control and snap back the way I want to. He suddenly steps into our path, all rugged good looks and raw power. My belly swoops and flutters when I see him, and the next thing I know, he’s extracting me from the Prince’s arms. “I’m going to take my mate back now.” He announces with a lethal grin, not waiting for the Prince to agree. “It’s been too long

I laugh, “It’s only been a few minutes.”

“I meant what I said.” Sinclair beams, sending a ripple of laughs around the room as he sweeps me into his arms. We spin away on the dance floor, leaving the Prince to stew in his anger.

Only once we’ve left our audience behind and I’m swaying safely in Sinclair’s arms, does he drop his lips to my ear. “What did he say to you?”

I glance up at him hesitantly. “I’m not sure I should tell you, not here at least.”

“If you don’t tell me now I’m going to throw a tantrum right here in the middle of the dance floor” Sinclair jokes, though there’s a sharp edge in his voice that tells me he’s not merely jesting. He might have chosen the words to make me laugh, but I can tell he needs to know the truth if he’s going to maintain his control.

“He admitted sending the rogues after me.” I relate, peeking up at him. “He threatened me and the baby, told me to leave while I still can.”

Sinclair pulls me closer, until I can no longer see his handsome face. Still, I can picture him glowering at everyone around us, staring daggers at anyone who sets eyes on me-like a dragon guarding its treasure. “Don’t worry, Ella.” Sinclair rumbles, his strong hands caressing my spine. “I won’t let him hurt you or the baby.”

“I know you won’t.” I assure him, leaning close so he can feel my solid weight in his arms. “I trust you, Dominic.”

I’m amazed to realize I’m speaking the truth. I do trust Sinclair, despite everything I’ve been through. I know he wouldn’t intentionally hurt me, and I know he’ll keep me safe.

“Thank you, baby.” He croons, sending delicious shivers down my spine. Even as I revel in his warm tone and terms of endearment, his earlier threats are still ringing in my ears, and I have to wonder whether I have another punishment ahead of me.

“Am I still in trouble?” I squeak, not sure whether I’m hoping he says yes or no. There’s something strangely addictive about his dominance, and I’m still aching for his touch. At the time I thought the longing would pass with time, but it seems like my hormones have gotten

the better of me. Rather than passing, my desire has only grown, and the flames were stoked ever higher when he began scolding me earlier.

“No, sweetheart.” He answers, donning an indulgent smile. “You kept me from making a terrible mistake. You helped me stay calm when I was completely out of control. You don’t deserve a punishment, if anything you deserve to be rewarded.”

“Oh? What kind of reward?” I inquire, both hoping he’ll give me a scandalous answer, and praying he won’t. I’m not sure how much longer I can resist him, even though I know I should.

He chuckles, sending heat through every inch of my body. “That’s a dangerous question, little

one.”

I smother a whimper, even as heat pools in my core. I hear Sinclair take in a sharp breath, and I’m sure he can smell my arousal again. I lean my forehead against the hard muscles of his chest. “What are we doing, Dominic?” I sigh, knowing I’m being terribly contrary. “I’m sorry, I know I’m not making any of this easier I’m just so confused.”

“It’s okay to be confused.” He promises. “And I think you were right this afternoon. You’ve been through too much. You’re not in any state of mind to make those kinds of decisions. today- no matter what your body wants.”

“But my body wants it so badly.” I confess, figuring that I’ve already admitted as much in our dream date, so I have nothing left to lose.

“Mine does too.” Sinclair smiled wryly, “if you could hear my wolf, Ella – you’d be scandalized maybe even frightened.”

“I’m not sure I could be frightened of you. Not the way you mean at least.” I breathe, “it’s the strangest thing. If you were anyone else I’d be terrified, but it’s like the baby won’t let me.” “He’s a smart baby.” Sinclair confirms, putting up with pride. “He gets that from you.”

I’m tempted to argue, but I can see a warning glint in Sinclair’s eyes and think better of it. “So what do we do? How do we resist this?”

“We keep at it.” Sinclair decides, “until we can’t any longer.”

“And then?” I prompt him, curious beyond words. “When we can no longer resist?”

“We give in.” Sinclair answers, lowering his forehead to mine. “And pray we can survive it.”

#Chapter 76 – Hormones

Ella

It's been three weeks since the ball, and though I can scarcely believe it, it seems like all the campaign drama passed with Solstice. There has been nothing but calm since the holidays, and I'm beyond thrilled that I've been able to relax a bit, even though part of me is waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under us.

I've spent my time pouring over baby books, making plans for our nursery, and brainstorming baby names and the best part is that I've felt less nauseated and achy every day. In fact, yesterday marked the beginning of my second trimester – since shifter pregnancies are so short- and it seems impossible to think my baby will arrive in four short months. My stress has already eased knowing I'm leaving the most vulnerable phase of my pregnancy behind, and I don't even mind that I've been seeing Sinclair less now that he's gone back to a regular work schedule. 2

Well, that's not entirely true. I miss him. I miss him much more than I should, but I'm also grateful for the space. It's much easier to resist our attraction to each other when we're not constantly together and taking part in intimate rituals and romantic outings.

I don't know why you're being so stubborn. The little voice in my head mutters. If you're going to give in eventually, why not throw in the towel now and enjoy being together in the last months before the baby comes? You do realize that in another four months you'll never be alone again. 2

I'm not having this argument again. I decide. We agreed it's better for the baby if we can co- parent without our own relationship drama getting in the way.

You mean you decided and he went along with it because he doesn't know it's such a stupid reason. My conscience snipes.

It's not stupid! I insist. I'm going to be a mother, I have to put my baby first – that's what being a parent is all about.

You keep telling yourself that. The voice derides. We both know you're just a big scaredy cat.

Oh put a sock in it! I exclaim, losing my patience. "Stupid conscience." I mutter aloud, sorting through the clothing racks in my giant closet and trying to choose an outfit for our parenting class tonight. "Uppity, annoying, impossible..."

"

"Talking to yourself, trouble?" Sinclair's deep voice breaks through my angry diatribe, and I jump about ten feet in the air.

Whirling around, I find him leaning in the closet doorway, watching me intently. "Dominic, you scared me half to death!"

The big wolf tsks, coming forward and pulling me into his arms, petting me gently. "I'm sorry." He croons, kissing my hair. "Sometimes I forget how weak your hearing is."

ridiculous "My hearing is fine!" I object, feeling irrationally angry all of a sudden. "It's your shifter stealth that's the problem. It's not right that anyone as big as you should be able to move around so quietly."

"Alright." He agrees, and I have a sneaking suspicion he's smothering a smile. "It's my fault,

I'm a big hulking beast and I need to do a better job of stomping around."

I pull away from him, narrowing my eyes. "Are you laughing at me?"

Now Sinclair does smile, "Is there any way I can answer that question that won't annoy you?"

I huff, deciding not to dignify that question with an answer. I turn back to my closet, beginning to rifle through trouser options. “Nothing fits anymore.” I complain, eliminating every pair of pants I come across. “I can’t button any of these!”

Sinclair’s palm rubs over the gentle curve of my belly. The changes are still very slight, but clothing has gone from being a bit tight to entirely too small. My breasts might not be so

my

tender anymore, but they spill out of all my bras, and my favorite fitted tops now stretch and strain to cover my growing tummy. “That’s a good thing, Ella.” Sinclair reminds me gently. It means the baby is growing big and strong.”

“Oh enough of that!” I argue, not sure why I’m so determined to disagree with everything he says. “All that means is that your giant pup is coming closer to pushing my body past its limits. Normal women don’t show this much at this stage you know.” My throat is stinging with the threat of tears, even though I know I’m being unreasonable. I feel like I’m on a roller coaster, I can see exactly what’s happening, but I also can’t get off the ride.

Sinclair clucks sympathetically, “You’re having a rough day, aren’t you, sweetheart?” I can hear the guilt in his voice, and it makes me want to cry all the more. He’s been working from home a lot and I can tell he feels like he’s neglecting us, but there’s also nothing to be done. He bears so much responsibility, and it’s only going to get worse if he wins the crown. Suddenly I feel terrible for being so grumpy with him, when he’s already blaming himself despite doing everything he can to take care of me.

“I’m sorry.” I sniffle. “I shouldn’t be giving you a hard time.”

“You’re allowed.” He promises, pulling a wrap dress from the clothing rack. “Here, no buttons, no zippers. You don’t even have to wear a bra.”

“Thank you.” I murmur, sliding my arms around his middle and squeezing tightly. Sinclair purrs and snuggles me until I’ve had my fill, and half an hour later we’re back on the padded floors of our monthly birthing class, listening to the instructor explain precisely why I’m slowly losing my mind.

“Moms, you’ll be feeling physically better now that you’re out of the first trimester, but this is the time when your hormones really kick into high gear. You may already be experiencing some intense mood swings, as well as physical changes to things like hair growth or skin pigmentation.” She looks around at the couples spread out on the mats, and I see I’m not the only expectant mother looking sheepish or anxious.

“You’ll also experience heightened libidos – something I encourage you all to take advantage of, as you won’t have time for much fun after your pup arrives.”

Oh great. I think bitterly. As if it wasn’t already hard enough to resist Sinclair. I’d known this was part of pregnancy, but I also hadn’t understood how powerless I’d be to my hormones. I’d assumed it would be like PMS mood swings, not these constant extremes. The instructor is still speaking “Bottom line, mates, it’s your job to keep Mom satisfied and relaxed during these next few months. She’s going to need you to be her rock while she weathers these stormy seas, so I encourage you not to go overboard coddling her tempting as it may be. Her wolf needs to feel your strength now more than ever

Somehow I really don’t think they give the same advice in human birthing classes. I mutter to my conscience.

A warm chuckle rumbles against my back and Sinclair's voice sounds in my mind. You should see the look on your face.

I look up at Sinclair, wondering how he was able to see my expression in the first place. He grins down at me, then steals a kiss from my pouting lips.

"You also need to create a birthing plan you're both comfortable with." The instructor carries on. "By show of hands, who here is considering a home birth rather than a hospital birth."

I raise my hand hesitantly. I haven't decided which option I feel most comfortable with yet, but I'm open to either and want to hear what she has to say. However, almost as soon as I put my hand up, a low growl sounds in my ear. "Put that lovely little hand down. You're going to deliver in the hospital and that is not up for discussion."

I turn to glare at him. I might not be decided yet, but I don't appreciate him taking away my options. "You're supposed to be keeping me relaxed and listening to my instincts." I state fiercely, mimicking the instructor in a saccharine tone even though the whole class can probably hear us, "trusting my body's wisdom."

"Ella, you're high risk." Sinclair reminds me sternly, the rugged contours of his face set in a foreboding expression. "We need to be at the hospital in case the doctors need to make an emergency intervention."

I know he's thinking of my high blood pressure, not to mention the fact that I'm going to be the first human in recorded history to give birth to a shifter. I also know this makes sense, but his high handed manner is making me gnash my teeth in frustration, "It's my body."

His wolf flashes in his eyes, “You’re mine and so is this baby. I’m not going to let endanger him or yourself, Ella.”

you

Without thinking, I offer him a snarl – which on my lips sounds more like the grumble of an angry kitten, but I’m sure my intentions are clear.

Sinclair’s hands tighten around me. His power washes over me, and I wish I had a tail to tuck between my legs. “Did you just growl at me, little mate?”

Despite my trembling spine, I tilt my chin up defiantly. “Why not? You growl at me all the time.”

Before he can respond, the instructor laughs, breaking the tense silence in the rest of the room and reclaiming control over the class. “You see, this is the perfect example of why it’s important to talk about these things together early on. You might assume you’re on the same page but discover you have different ideas.”

It’s also an example of why naughty humans need just as firm a hand as she wolves. Sinclair intones, speaking through his bond with the baby. His mouth is at my throat, his lips grazing the spot where he’ll one day pretend to mark me. I feel a nip from his fangs, and my anger abruptly slips away. All of a sudden my entire body melts, and I realize that the instructor had been right

I do need to feel Sinclair’s strength right now. Then again, maybe this is more hormonal insanity, because why else am I now wishing he could mark me for real?

#Chapter 77 – Baby Names

Sinclair

“What do you think about this one?” I ask, pulling Ella’s attention away from the rack of onesies she’s currently perusing.

“Oh, so you care what I want now?” She retorts, shooting me a sulky glare. She’s been pouting ever since we left our parenting class, and despite the instructor’s quick thinking to prevent us having a very public argument, I know Ella hasn’t gotten over my high-handed order regarding a hospital birth. We decided to spend our free afternoon shopping for baby gear before we ever left the house today, or I’m sure she wouldn’t have agreed to stay in my company. The stubborn creature has done her best to ignore me since our disagreement, only allowing me to touch her when required for class and barely speaking to me.

Now, as I’m considering cribs and strollers, Ella has placed herself as far away as she can get without leaving my sight, a line she seemed to understand she shouldn’t cross no matter how unhappy she is with me. Sighing, I cross the small shop until I’m looming over her. “Ella, of course I care about what you want. I didn’t mean to dismiss your feelings earlier, but there are some risks I’m simply not willing to take.”

“I just wanted to consider my options.” Ella grumbles back, crossing her arms over her chest. and unintentionally pushing her pert breasts together. “I don’t even know that I would want a home birth, I just thought it was something to consider.”

Dragging my gaze from her lush body, I answer. “I understand that and if our situation were different, I wouldn’t have a problem with a home birth, but our situation isn’t different.” I reach for her, but she backs out of my reach. “If you want a water birth or a doula, we can arrange for those things at the hospital, but we need to be practical.” 1

Ella glowers up at me, her lower lip quivering dangerously. I have a bad feeling she’s about to cry, and suddenly I’m wishing she

would growl at me again. I can't recall ever hearing such a cute noise except from actual pups. I wasn't about to let her get away with it, but it had also been

very

difficult not to smile. "I don't want the baby to be high risk." Ella finally shares, her voice husky. "It isn't fair."

"I agree." I tell her seriously, hating the idea of either one of them being threatened. "But it is the reality, and we have to make sure you have the safest birth possible. In fact, if your blood pressure doesn't come down by the end of the week, I think we need to go back to the doctor."

Ella nods, fighting back a hiccup. Her golden eyes are shining, and I'm quickly losing my patience with the distance between us. "Okay."

"Okay." I repeat, ducking my head to try and catch her eye. "So are we friends again? Can we kiss and make up?"

Ella willingly comes into my arms, her small, warm body all tension and sharp edges. She snuggles into my embrace and breathes in my scent, though she doesn't give up her sulking completely. "You better not be this bossy in the delivery room."

I chuckle, low and deep, stroking her long hair. "Oh, you're going to let me be in the delivery room?" I ask, surprised that she wants this, even though I always planned on forcing my way

To my surprise, Ella pulls back with a sharp intake of breath. "You are going to be there aren't you?"

She looks so frightened by the prospect of delivering the baby alone that my wolf begins to instinctively purr. "Of course, sweet

Ella. I'm not going to let you do it alone – even if you hate me when the time comes and try to kick me out, I won't leave.”

Her racing heart slows, but she eyes me suspiciously. “That sounds bossy.”

“I said I would be there, not that I wouldn't be bossy.” I tease, pulling her close again.

“Tyrant.” She accuses, even as she nuzzles her face into my chest.

“Troublemaker.” I reply, relieved that we're no longer at odds even though I find her feisty nature irresistible. I much prefer keeping our disagreements playful, rather than serious. “We haven't talked about baby names either.” I realize aloud, “We should probably figure these things out before we go back to class. I don't think our teacher appreciated us stealing her thunder.”

“We can talk about names.” Ella agrees, seeming content to stay wrapped in my arms, even though other customers are already glancing our way – smiling to themselves. Oblivious, Ella performs a huge yawn, her lovely lips stretching wider than I thought was possible.

“Mhmm, do you want to keep shopping while we do?” I inquire, trying to keep the amusement out of my voice. “Or do you want to go home and take a nap?”

“We can keep shopping.” She answers, making no effort to move.

“You do know you'll have to let me go in order to do that, right?” I ask, wanting nothing of the kind.

Ella blinks, as if she didn't realize she was already half asleep and leaning all her weight against me. She steps back, smoothing

down her dress as she considers the cribs in front of us. “Well, what are your thoughts about names?”

I flash her my most wolfish grin. “How about Thor or Rex?”

Ella gapes, not realizing I’m only making mischief. “You might as well call him butch or spike!” She exclaims, her voice taking a haughty turn. “He might be a wolf but that doesn’t mean you have to give him a dog’s name, Dominic.”

“Well he’ll be Alpha one day, so it should be something strong.” I reply, still smiling at my indignant little human.

She snorts, “names don’t make someone strong that’s about character and integrity.”

“Oh really?” I challenge, “so you think calling our son daffodil will set him up for success, do you?”

I’ve never seen someone so much shorter than me try to look down their nose at me, but somehow Ella manages. “I think if we call our son daffodil, he’ll redefine the word for generations to come.”

“Maybe, but he’ll also be bullied on the playground his entire childhood.” I reason, pretending to read the information sheet for one of the strollers.

“Which is why we can’t name him anything as ridiculous as Rex ” Ella replies, digging in her heels. “I just don’t think you should let something as arbitrary as a name decide someone’s

character.” 1

“Well see that’s where we disagree, you see, I believe there is great power in names.” I explain, actually meaning my words now.

She frowns pensively, “how about Henry, for your father?”

Suddenly my interest in getting a rise out of Ella evaporates. “That’s a very sweet idea.” I concede, pinning her with my gaze. “But do you like the name Henry?”

“It’s not my favorite.” She shrugs, “but I don’t dislike it.”

“And I suppose someone who loves children as much as you do – who’s been trying for so long... there’s no chance you have names already picked out, right?” I guess, already knowing the answer to my question.

Ella flushes a delectable shade of pale pink, but she doesn’t say a word.

“Well, come on out with it.” I encourage.

“Why don’t you tell me yours first.” She suggests, “your real ones I mean.”

Laughing, I agree. “I’ve always liked the name Damon. Then there’s Gabriel, or Maxim... but my favorite is Orion.”

“Like the hunter, from all the myths?” Ella clarifies.

“Not to mention the stars.” I reply, thinking of the constellation.

“I like that idea.” She muses, smiling softly. “I always imagine that if I had a son, I’d call him Rafe.”

“Rafe,” I repeat, rolling the name over my tongue. “You know that means wolf, don’t you?” Ella stops in her tracks, and though I initially suspect that she’s merely surprised the name she chose has this particular meaning, when I look over at her I freeze. Her eyes are full of tears, and her hand is pressed to her stomach.

“Sweetheart, what is it?” I ask urgently, closing the distance between us.

“The baby,” She answers, her cheeks splitting into an incandescent smile. “He just moved. I think he might have kicked!”

“What!” I immediately move my hand alongside hers, knowing I’m grinning like a fool.

“It was when you said, Rafe.” As the name leaves her lips, the tiniest bump flutters against my hand, and suddenly we’re both laughing. My own eyes are shining now, and I pull Ella’s mouth down to my own. “I think we just named our baby.” I tell her ecstatically between kisses.

We stay like that for a long time, repeatedly saying the name and celebrating every time our son kicks in reply. Through the bond I can tell he loves the sound of our laughter and joy, and soon he’s kicking just to make us smile. Eventually we give up on shopping entirely. I take Ella home and lavish her with all her favorite things the self care gifts I’d been unable to give her after the Wild Hunt. We spend the rest of the day curled up in front of a blazing fire, and reveling in our delight over this milestone. I know our future is still so uncertain, but right now everything is perfect, and I’m not going to take a single moment for granted.

#Chapter 78 – Ella Eavesdrops

Sinclair

A week after our pup started moving, my brother appears on my doorstep, claiming to bring news of the Prince. I’m amazed to discover that I’m not angry to see him for the first time in years. In fact, as strange as it seems, I’m actually thankful for his presence. I’m still not sure whether he’s truly my ally, but my wolf is urging

me to trust him, and he's rarely wrong. Besides, any intelligence – even false intelligence is still new information, and I can sniff out a lie better than anyone.

“How's Ella?” He asks, pulling off his coat.

“She's perfect.” I boast, unable to help myself. I can feel myself beaming, but I can't seem to turn off my smile muscles. “She's napping right now, and we're going back to the doctor tomorrow because her blood pressure is still a bit elevated... but otherwise she's absolutely wonderful. I couldn't have asked for a better mother for my pup.”

“I meant... after the attack.” Roger clarifies, looking slightly baffled by my effusiveness. “Oh,” I pause, laughing softly. “Sorry, it's easy to get caught up. She's still a bit shaken, but her nightmares are happening less frequently now.”

“You're really in love, huh?” Roger inquires, looking surprised.

I scoff, “Did you really doubt that?” I don't pause to consider this idea. As far as Roger knows we fell in love and chose to start a family together. He shouldn't have any reason to think this is all a lie, and I don't like the idea that he might be onto our scheme.

“I mean, you haven't marked her, I figured you were only with her for political reasons.” He shrugs.

“The politics are just a bonus.” I rumble, and I'm mildly amazed to realize this isn't a lie. At some point the advantages of faking a relationship with Ella shifted, and after more than two months together, I'm discovering that I enjoy her company far more than I enjoy winning the campaign. Winning the campaign is important and necessary yes, but it's always been a duty, not a personal ambition that gives me pleasure.

“Anyway, what of the Prince?” I ask, ushering Roger into my office.

“Well if possible, he hates Ella even more than he hates you.” Roger sighs. “I think there’s something about being shown up by a she-wolf infuriates him or emasculates him on some visceral level. He really has it out for her.”

“He’s already tried to kill her twice.” I remark coldly, “I’m not sure how much worse things could get.”

pay

first,

“Dom, he doesn’t just want her dead now.” Roger grimaces. “He wants to make her to punish her, drag it out and make her death as painful as possible. And he wants to make sure you truly suffer too.”

My wolf rises to the surface, and for a moment I have to step away just to breathe. I count to ten inside my head, resisting the urge to shift and trying to block out the furious howls roaring through my head. “Do you know what he’s planning? Why is he taking so long to act if he hates her so much.”

“Because he’s needed the time to figure out how to get her away from you. That’s part of why things have been quiet this last month – he’s been plotting.” Roger shares, seeming truly disturbed to be delivering this news.

Goddess Damn it! I think desperately. This is all my fault, I put her in this danger!

We have to kill him. My wolf snarls, Forget the politics. She and the pup won’t be safe as long as he lives.

—

We can't just kill him. His father is the King. He's bound to take revenge for his son's murder and unlike the Prince, he has an entire army at his back. Besides, even if he doesn't I won't be considered a suitable candidate anymore and the Alpha council might call off the election. Then the man who paralyzed Dad will be rewarded with a throne he stole!

But it's Ella. My wolf insists. And it's the pup. We have to protect them.

"Plotting what?" I growl, my clenched fists shaking with rage as my claws extend and retract.

"He's going to try and lure her out on her own so he can take her. Right now your guards are keeping his spies at a distance, but he's planning a campaign event for the Lunas. He thinks if he can guarantee a women-only event then you won't be around to protect her." Roger shares, watching me nervously, as if afraid I might explode at a moment's notice.

"When is it going to happen?" I demand, trying to recall if I've seen any sort of invitation matching this description.

"In a couple of weeks." Roger explains, "He's planning another rogue attack for the same day, just to be sure you can't get to her."

I hear faint movement on the other side of my office door, and I hold up a finger to pause Roger. He glances in the direction of the soft footsteps tiptoeing towards my door. Ella's scent comes fluttering through the wooden panel, and then a small shadow appears beneath the door jam. My lip quirks with exasperation and amusement. It would seem my little troublemaker is up from her nap, and she's taken it into her beautiful head to eavesdrop.

I move my finger to my lips, exchanging a knowing glance with Roger. I raise my voice slightly, just in case Ella's human hearing needs the volume. "I don't know, if I sell after the campaign is over there's not much the council can do about it."

my

baby

A soft, feminine gasp meets my ears and Roger smothers a laugh, covering it with a cough. They can always call for another election, don't forget that's how we ended up in this situation in the first place."

"Maybe, but by then I'll have the army at my disposal." I counter, rising to my feet and moving as silently as I can across the floor. "They won't stand a chance against me."

I abruptly swing the door open, startling Ella and throwing her off balance. Clearly she was leaning her weight into the door in order to hear better. I catch her slender wrists before she can tumble to the floor, though I'm currently of the opinion that her bottom could do with a bit of soreness.

"Well well, what have we here?" I rumble ominously. "It looks like one very naughty little spy."

Ella's wide eyes flash with emotion as she works through her predicament processing her shock, fear, confusion and then outrage once she realizes our previous words were solely for

her benefit. "You rat!" She exclaims finally, "that wasn't funny!"

"Oh I beg to differ." I reply, scooping her up into my arms. "I think you got exactly what you deserved."

I return to my chair, settling the defiant bundle in my lap. Ella huffs, glaring at me with all the ferocity and indignance she possesses. “Well from the sounds of it I should have been part of this conversation in the first place. You left me out again, Dominic!”

“You were asleep.” I state pointedly. “And you need your rest. I had every intention of filling you in once you woke. If you’d knocked I would have gladly invited you in.”

Ella deflates slightly, looking suddenly unsure of herself. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” I confirm, closing my hand over her nape to let her feel my solid strength. “You need to know these things as much as I do.”

“But... you were so determined not to worry me.” She argues, her voice very small now.

—

“That was before before you helped me understand how it made you feel not to know what was happening in your own life.” I remind her, “And before I appreciated how much being informed would encourage you to be cautious.”

“Oh.” Ella murmurs, blushing deeply. “I’m sorry, I thought...”

“I know what you thought.” I answer, “But you don’t need to worry about that right now.” Just when she starts to relax, I lower my mouth to her ear, “We’ll deal with your bad behavior later.”

Ella shivers against me, her sweet scent growing warm and liquid. Roger rolls his eyes, “You two aren’t very subtle, you know that.”

if

“We’re not trying to be.” I smirk, loving the way she’s squirming anxiously against me. “Now, you would please help my mischievous mate get up to speed, I’m sure she’d appreciate it.” “Yes please,” Ella offers shyly, “I’m sorry I eavesdropped on your conversation.”

Roger shakes his head. “You two are really a pair, you know that?”

“We know.” I beam, pausing to kiss the soft spot behind Ella’s ear.

“Alright, well the bottom line is that you need to be very careful.” Roger sighs, “and you’re going to get an invitation for a women’s event in a couple of weeks. Whatever you do, you have to make an excuse not to attend. Accept the invitation, but pull out at the last second so that they don’t know you’re onto them. In the meantime, I can give you details about the rogue attack so you can stop it before it happens. But the Prince can’t find out I’m helping you or we’ll lose the inside track.”

“What is he planning on doing with me?” Ella inquires, cuddling closer to me for comfort.

Roger and I exchange a meaningful glance, and I imperceptibly shake my head. “You don’t need to worry about that.” Roger replies, “All you need to know is that you don’t want to fall into his hands at any cost Trust me when I tell you that if it comes to it and you have a choice between dying and being captured... choose death.”

#Chapter 79 – Blackmail

Ella

“I’m very worried about this, Ella.” The doctor pronounces grimly. He’s just taken my blood pressure, and it’s the same high reading

we recorded this morning with the home kit. “I know you’re in the middle of a campaign and you’re going through a lot, but you’ve got to find a way to de-stress. If you don’t, we’ll have to put you on bed rest.” 1

“Bed rest?” I repeat anxiously. “For how long?”

The doctor’s grave face speaks volume, “the duration of your pregnancy.”

Sinclair stiffens beside me, moving the hand at my nape to massage my tense shoulder muscles. “What can we do, other than avoiding high pressure situations?”

“I’m going to prescribe you some medicine that will be safe for you and the baby. Be sure to take it every day, and otherwise just keep up the things we’ve already talked about healthy eating, regular exercise, activities you find calming or relaxing.” The doctor continues, listing off suggestions. “You can try meditation or breathing exercises, pregnancy yoga is getting very popular. Sticking to a daily routine can really help when things are uncertain and you’re going through all these changes. And Alpha, help her however you can.”

13

“The instructor at our parenting class advised us not to coddle our mates- is that still good advice given Ella’s risk level?” Sinclair inquires.

“Yes.” The doctor agrees, smashing the small surge of hope I’d felt to pieces. “Human or wolf, your mate needs to feel like you’re in control, especially in cases like this where so much is out of your hands. She needs you to ground her if she starts to spiral to show her she can rely on you no matter what.”

I can't see the logic underpinning his words, but I still don't like it. What's so wrong with a bit of coddling? I've never been coddled in my entire life. As if he can read my thoughts, Sinclair's warm breath flutters over my neck, "Just remember how much you hated it when I kept you out of the loop, trying to protect you."

Oh. I guess I have been coddled after all. I'm about to acknowledge this, but when I look up at Sinclair, he's smiling at me so affectionately that my heart stops beating. "Besides," He continues indulgently. "Just because I don't coddle you, doesn't mean I can't pamper you the way you deserve."

I find myself giggling like a schoolgirl, and the doctor steps out, clearly feeling as though he's intruding on something even though we're only talking. When we get home, Sinclair tucks me in for a nap and returns to work, making me promise to call on the servants if I need anything and vowing to be home as early as he can.

I sleep fitfully. Even exhausted as I am, I find it very difficult to sleep without Sinclair. I swear he's becoming like my security blanket my body won't relax fully unless he's with me and my nightmares always surge in his absence. I'm getting too attached to him. I think sadly, climbing out of bed after half an hour of tossing and turning.

So? The little voice in my head challenges. He's the baby's father he's going to be in your life forever. Why not get attached?

Because he won't always be in my life in this way. He's not going to be sleeping with me when

he finds his second chance mate- and I have to be able to survive on my own. I can't become so codependent that I need him to take care of me. I answer ruefully.

Maybe he won't find his mate at all. The voice suggests, sounding much too hopeful for my liking.

I scoff at my own naivete, get it together, Ella! You can't start thinking that way – it's just asking for heartbreak.

I've only just opened the door to go downstairs and find an afternoon snack when one of the guards appears at the top of the stairwell. "Luna, there's a visitor for you."

"Really?" I stop in my tracks. "Who is it? I wasn't expecting anyone."

"She says you used to work for her." He shrugs. "I tried to get her name but she wouldn't tell me. Should I make her leave?"

I pause, knowing Sinclair wouldn't like the idea of an unidentified woman entering his home. I don't like the idea myself – especially after Roger's warning. "What does she look like?"

"Tall, dark hair, tan skin – maybe 40?" He lowers his voice to a whisper. "She's human."

My stomach sinks, it does sound like a former employer and if she's human then it's probably true. In fact, she sounds like the heartless woman who fired me so callously after I tried to beg Sinclair for Cora's job. "No, let her in. I'll speak to her."

Be nice, I instruct myself sternly. Maybe she came to apologize, don't be rude just because your feelings were hurt.

When I get downstairs, Jake and Millie's mother is gazing around Sinclair's sitting room, a hungry gaze on her face. She looks me up and down as I enter, something distinctly spiteful in her open perusal. She speaks before I can say a word of welcome. "Well, you've certainly come up in the world, Ella. Lord only knows what you had to do to wiggle your way into Dominic Sinclair's bed."

“What are you doing here?” I inquire, no longer feeling any need to play nice. She clearly set the tone of this conversation and though I’m sorely tempted to kick her out now, I need to find out what she wants first.

“Well when I saw your picture plastered across the society section of the paper I could scarcely believe it. I had to come and find out if the rumors were true.” She explains simply.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes, the media firestorm my relationship with Sinclair created clearly didn’t stop with the shifter news. Everyone in the human world thought Sinclair was just a handsome billionaire, and he was still a public figure for all his philanthropic work. I should have realized this might happen my social circle had been very small before discovering the werewolf world and most of the people from my past wouldn’t have any reason to be suspicious of my relationship with Sinclair. This woman, however, knows exactly how at odds I was with my pup’s father in the beginning.

“Well now that you’ve seen that they were true, you can be leaving.” I suggest, knowing there must be more to this.

“Oh no, I think you and I have much to discuss, Ella” Her eyes are locked on the curve of my belly. “It’s no wonder you were begging outside his gate that day. No doubt trying to get a bit of money out of him to take care of your little problem?”

“My baby isn’t a problem.” I insist. “And I didn’t even know I was pregnant then. I was asking for help on behalf of my sister she was going to lose her job over a misunderstanding, ironically enough.”

My ex-employer studies me for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not she believes. After a pregnant pause, she snorts. “So what, you thought because you spread your legs for him he

would fall at your feet?” She guesses, drawing the wrong conclusion. Shaking her head, she arches a brow. “Though I have to give you credit for not giving up when he’d knocked you up. Very enterprising – for a common whore.”

My jaw drops, “Excuse me?”

you realized

“I always knew there was something off about you. It never made sense why you wanted to chase after my brats all day anyway. Now I see the brilliance of your plan.” She nods at my small baby bump. “You were probably selling yourself all over that neighborhood, just waiting for exactly this sort of ‘accident.’”

“Are you suggesting...” I can’t even say the words, unable to believe my ears.

“How much did you charge him anyway?” She questions, venom dripping from her tongue. “I suppose being so beautiful meant you were able to attract clients far above your station, still, it seems backwards that he should be the one to pay for a night with you. And now you’ve won the lottery by conceiving his bastard.”

I’m not sure what upsets me more, hearing her call my pup names, or her accusations about me charging Sinclair for sex. “You come here and insult my baby, then accuse me of being a prostitute, and you think I’m just going to sit here and take it?” I demand fiercely. “You’re not just cruel – you’re delusional. Get out of my house this instant.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” She hisses in return. “Not without a check.”

The room is spinning around me, “You expect me to pay you? Why, to keep you from spreading these lies?”

“I think the tabloids would be very interested in what I could tell them about you.” She smirks. “They’re painting you two as some sort of fairytale romance – just imagine the headlines if they realized you’re nothing but a disgraced nanny who couldn’t even hold onto her job because she was too busy whoring around for wealthy men.”

I grit my teeth, trying to slow my racing thoughts enough to process this. I don’t particularly care what the human papers say about me, and I have enough good references from past jobs to refute what she’s saying. But that isn’t the problem. The real problem is that if the shifter media learns I was here in Moon Valley, working as a nanny for a human family in Sinclair’s neighborhood and not off in the bloodbane pack, they’ll figure out I’m human. If the truth comes out about my real identity, all our lies will be exposed, and the Campaign will be over faster than we can blink. The Prince will win, and the entire realm will be in danger – not to mention that my baby’s life will practically be forfeit.

I have to talk to Sinclair, I have to find a way to stop her.

“Give me twenty four hours.”

#Chapter 80 – Roger Learns a Secret

Ella

“What!” Sinclair roars through the phone receiver, his deep voice full of such rage and aggression that it makes me flinch. I’ve just told him about every horrible moment of my conversation with my former employer though now it’s probably more accurate to think of her as my blackmailer.

I’ll have to change her contact information in my phone to reflect her new title I can even assign her an ominous ringtone. I fight

down the urge to laugh at this insane thought, wondering why my brain always twists the darkest moments of my life into humor. There is nothing funny about this situation.

“I don’t know what to do.” I whimper. “I don’t care what she says about me-“I’m interrupted by a low snarl, Sinclair’s wolf’s wordless insistence that he cares even if I don’t.” but if she sells this story then everyone will realize I’m human.”

“I’ll kill her.” He rumbles, overflowing with menace. “She won’t find it so easy to speak such filth when her head is no longer connected to her body.”

“You can’t!” I object, still feeling as though he’s missing the point. “That will only call more attention to her there will be an investigation into her life and eventually they’ll want to interview me. My identity is bound to get out if that happens. Also, you know murder is wrong, Dominic.”

“She threatened you.” He growls, as if I’ve forgotten. “And there won’t be an investigation if I make it look like an accident. You’d be amazed how many car accidents result in decapitations.”

“Blackmail hardly warrants an execution, and you can’t go around ripping the heads off everyone who is mean to me.” I insist, overwhelmed that this surreal conversation is actually occurring.

“You’re supposed to be setting a good example for our son.”

“The example I’ll be setting is how to protect one’s mate from vile, conniving, despicable, foul

“Dominic!” I interrupt, raising my voice over his increasing volatile grumbling. “She has children who love her she may not deserve their love, but if you kill her, they’ll suffer. Jake and Millie don’t deserve that.”

“They’d probably be better off without her.” Sinclair suggests sullenly, his voice shifting then, as if a new idea is occurring to him. “We could even take them in – adopt them. I know you miss them... just think, we could have three children instead of one.”

“Oh really, are you going to kill their father too?” I inquire waspishly, shaking my head. “That depends.” Sinclair replies hopefully, “would you be okay with that?”

“I don’t think I really appreciated how bloodthirsty shifters are about their families until now.” I tell Cora a little while later “The ridiculous wolf actually thought he could win me over to his plan by waving those precious babies under my nose. It was like trying to talk a hungry jackal out of his dinner.

“I mean he wasn’t completely off base “Cora jokes, “if it was possible to convince you,

bribing you with children is probably how I’d go about it too.”

“Well I told him that he wasn’t allowed to rip any heads off under any circumstances.” I

counter.

Cora snorts, “I bet he took that really well.”

“Oh he grumbled and complained, but he got over it.” I laugh, leaving out the part where he threatened to come home and ‘spank my sassy bottom’ until I agreed to his violent plan. That is not the sort of detail I want my sister to know.

“So what’s he going to do?” My sister inquires curiously, sitting across from me in the same parlor where my blackmailer threatened me two hours ago. I called her and asked her to come over after getting off the phone with Sinclair, in desperate need of some moral support. 1

“He told me not to worry and that he’d take care of it.” I sigh. “I doubt he’ll pay her, but if he can get Mike to turn himself in to the police, he can probably convince her not to make good on her promise.”

“Are you okay with that?” Cora wonders aloud, “I wouldn’t think you’d be comfortable trusting someone else with something so important.”

“I trust Dominic.” I admit, blushing shyly. Cora understands better than anyone what a momentous statement this is for me. She knows I’ve always had to rely on myself, and that I’ve never felt safe relying on anyone else because of far too many bad experiences. “Honestly I felt better just talking to him about it. I know he’ll fix this, and my only concern is that he’ll lose his temper and go overboard protecting us.”

The baby kicks softly, as if he agrees. “Quick, come here!” I exclaim, waving Cora over. She does, and I pull her palm to my belly. The baby is still now, so I murmur encouragement at my tummy. “Come on Rafe, say hello to your Aunt Cora.”

At the sound of his name, the pup complies, and Cora and I both squeal. She hugs me tightly then, “You’re glowing you know that? I’ve never seen you so happy – and correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think it’s just becoming a Mom.”

“You’re not wrong.” I confess, grinning despite myself. “I am happy, even with all the danger and the drama. I didn’t know it was possible to feel this way.”

Cora shakes her head, eyes shining. “God you should see your smile, Elle. I swear I could kiss Dominic.”

I’m amazed to feel a stab of jealousy when she mentions kissing Sinclair, even though I know it’s only an expression. “You don’t

think it's completely deranged?" I ask shyly. "I mean rogues keep popping up and trying to kill me, and a horrible heartless woman is blackmailing me. It seems crazy to be happy in spite of all that."

"Ella," She says seriously, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. "Do you really think it's crazy, or do you just feel like you don't deserve to be happy?"

Her words cut me to the core, and I find myself staring at my hands. I ponder her question for a few seconds, shrugging. "I mean, do I deserve it? Not fishing for compliments, not feeling sorry for myself but what have I done in my life to deserve so much prosperity? In a few months I could be as good as a Queen, even if it is only temporary

"Ella, the rich and powerful don't end up that way because of merit!" Cora argues. "How many of the people running the world actually worked to get where they are? Everyone deserves to

be happy... well maybe not the Prince or your old boss, but you do! You might not have done anything remarkable yet, but you've also never hurt anyone! You've never ruined lives for your own selfish promotion."

"I haven't been a complete saint." I remind her. "I mean I've stolen and broken laws, I'm lying to millions of people even as we speak.'

11

"You stole when we were children. You broke laws to survive and to keep me alive, to protect the other orphans. You've taken care of people your whole life and you kept doing it for work. because you love it so much. And you're lying to people so that you can protect them from a monster. You're still taking care of people

now, and you're risking your life to do it. Trust me Ella, you deserve all the prosperity and all the happiness in the world."

I peek over at my sister, my throat scratching with unshed tears. Looking at her beloved face, I find the strength to ask a question I've been too afraid to ask until now. "What if I can't do it?" "Do what, be queen?" She clarifies, her brow furrowed.

"Or any of it? I mean I'm just a human – every day I learn about something else I had no idea existed. And after the baby comes I'm going to lose its scent. What if I can't keep up the act? Or what if I can, but I make some horrible mistake because of my ignorance? I'm going to be responsible for so many people, what if I screw up and someone gets hurt as a result?" I question, swiping at my lashes to keep the tears from falling. 1

"You're not in this alone, Ella." Cora murmurs. "Dominic is going to be helping you every step of the way, and so are his people so will I, in any way I can. You don't have to bear all the responsibility yourself anymore- those days are over."

I hiccup, nodding and trying to get my breathing under control. "Thank you." I sniffle. "I needed to hear that."

Just then a creak sounds on the other side of the door, and I realize we aren't alone. I quickly cross the floor, pulling the door open before our eavesdropper can get away. I suppose this is payback for my own spying the other day, but I'm horrified when I realize who was listening. It's Roger, and he's just heard every single word of my conversation.