

Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Chapter 187

Ella

I look back and forth between Roger and Isabel, noting her pallid skin tone and his quiet concern. “

How long overdue is the plane?” I inquire, checking the time on my phone.

“It was supposed to get in five hours ago. James has never been late before.” Isabel pipes up, bouncing Sadie in her arms and visibly trying to control the tremors of fear wracking her body. I rise from my chair and attempt to put an arm around her, but she jerks away from my touch like a skittish horse. Sighing, I drop my hand.

“Is it possible there weren’t any refugees needing to make the journey today?” Henry asks, logical as ever.

“We haven’t had a single day without a new batch.” Gabriel answers grimly, “the wait list back on the continent is a mile long. If he didn’t come today, then something has gone wrong.”

“Is the news out of the continent still blacked out?” I question, even though I already know the answer. Damon shut such a tight lid on the media that the only information available to us anymore is brought by refugees and spies.

“Yes.” Gabriel replies, with the same dark expression. “I’ll see if I can tap into our spy network. I have a few people stationed around the egress points on the coast. But to be frank the fact that they haven’t reported in either doesn’t bode well.”

“What do we do?” Isabel frets aloud, looking hopefully at the King. “Can you stage a rescue mission?”

“We can’t go in blind.” Philippe declares evenly.

We need to know what we’re dealing with before we send relief troops or more aircraft.”

“But if the camps on the coast are under attack then they need your help now.” Isabel argues, swinging her frantic gaze to me, “Ella, do something!”

“We will.” I promise, resisting the urge to reach for her again. “We’re not going to just leave our people to fend for themselves, but Philippe is right, if we charge in blind then not only do we risk failure, but we risk losing even more people than were already in danger.”

“But there’s no time!” Isabel insists. “They could be dead already.” Even though she says they, I can hear the secret fear she won’t allow herself to voice. She means he could be dead already. He James, the soldier who rescued Sadie and delivered frightened orphans to the safety of Isabel’s nursery every day, who comforted the aloof she-wolf despite her ferocious protests. I’d known she was becoming attached to him, but I hadn’t realized quite how far she’s already fallen. I say a silent prayer to the Goddess for the man’s safety, to spare my cranky friend more pain if nothing else.

“I know.” I tell her gently, “but we don’t have many options here, Isabel.”

“Don’t look at me that way!” She snaps, cuddling Sadie closer. “Like I’m some hysterical woman who can’t see reason. I’m not fragile and I don’t need your pity.”

I cross my arms over my chest, an instinctive growl bubbling to life in my chest. Isabel jolts, her wolf reflexively quivering in the face of my warning, “That’s not what I’m doing, and lashing out at me isn’t going to bring him home any faster.” I state calmly.

Her eyes widen slightly, and then she deflates, submitting to my dominance. “I know, I’m sorry...I just...”

“I know.” I assure her, finally sliding my arm around her shoulder and leading her from the room. “We’ll get through it, whatever happens.”

We’re only halfway back to the nursery when Roger comes racing up behind us, “We just got word, James’s plane is about to land.”

Isabel jerks her head up, “what?”

“We don’t know what happened, but he just called in clearance to land.” Roger explains, Henry, Gabriel and Philippe joining us as we change direction. We all pile into the King’s car and speed towards the airfield. Isabel is shaking with relief beside me, and I try to lean against her for comfort without letting her realize what I’m doing. She glares at me but leans into my warmth despite her thorny demeanor.

We arrive just as James’s plane is taxiing down the runway, and when the cargo bay opens, a rush of refugees pour forth, more numerous than any arrival to date. I immediately sense that something has gone terribly wrong back home – worse even than before. There are too many people, and the looks on their faces break my heart. These aren’t the panicked but hopeful expressions of relief at a long journey’s end, but the hollow-eyed numbness of those that have seen too many horrors to feel anything anymore.

James is the last off the plane, and though Isabel runs half the distance to him, she seems to stop when she realizes what she was doing. Luckily he isn’t shy about his affection, and he pulls Isabel and Sadie into his arms as soon as they’re in reach. Sadie cuddles him happily, but Isabel pushes at his chest with a look of sullen detachment on her pretty features. “Where were you? What took so long?” She demands, her tone more harsh for all the hurt and fear she’s trying to mask.

James growls and tugs her closer, burying his head in her neck. She allows him this much, though she still has the sulky energy of a she-wolf who is determined not to be mollified. James purrs, and she finally relents, melting into his arms. I look away, knowing she wouldn’t want her private moment observed.

I turn my attention to the refugees, who ebb forward as if in a trance. The triage tent separates the injured from the unharmed, individuals from families and unaccompanied children from temporary guardians. I go to assist with the intake process, trying to offer what comfort I can.

I lead a couple with minor injuries to the medical tent, and Cora meets me in the doorway with wide eyes. “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know.” I sigh, “but it isn’t good.”

“The Usurper...” The she-wolf beside me mutters, searching my face for understanding. “Damon, he broke the pact.”

Cora and I exchange confused glances. “What pact?” I’m glad that my sister asks, because as Luna I should probably know about the major treaties and agreements governing shifter society.

“The secrecy pact.” Her mate explains gruffly, though this doesn’t actually clear things up for us.

I don’t know if he grew too ambitious and lost control, or if this was part of his plan all along... but it’s done now... the entire continent is on fire... the revolution is in shambles... nothing will ever be the same.”

His words strike fear into my heart, but I still don’t understand them. I don’t know about any secrecy pact, but I don’t want to force these weary wolves to explain things when they need to be focused on healing. “It’s okay.” I murmur, “go with Cora here and she’ll get you cleaned up, there will be plenty of time to talk later.”

I return to the triage tent, but when I see Gabriel and Henry huddled with James near his plane, I can’t stay away. I return to their side, noting that while Isabel is taking charge of unaccompanied pups, her eyes are locked on the pilot. I approach behind them, just in time to hear James saying, his army breached the borders in broad daylight – fully shifted, and set upon the humans. It seems Damon is done with shadow tactics that can be explained away by weapons or natural disasters.”

“You think it was intentional?” Gabriel demands, sounding as serious as I’ve ever heard him. “Not some sort of military exercise gone terribly wrong?”

An attempt to work with rogues who betrayed him?”

“From what I can tell it was a calculated assault.”

James confirms, “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“What’s happening?” I finally interrupt, pushing into the circle. “Someone mentioned a secrecy pact, and you’re saying Damon attacked the humans?”

“Yes,” James accedes, glancing anxiously towards Isabel and Sadie.

“The secrecy pact is what bound shifter society from coming out in the open in the lands we share with humans.” Henry explains, squeezing my hand. “It’s a treaty the united peaks formed in the earliest days of our existence, to preserve the safety of our people and preserve the cultures of both worlds.”

Understanding clicks into place, and my mouth drops open. “You’re saying that all the humans back home just found out that werewolves are real? Because Damon was too stupid or too greedy to maintain the pact?”

“Exactly.” Gabriel nods, “Our two worlds just collided- with violent and devastating impact. My guess is that Damon seeks to enslave the humans as a lesser class of being, that he means to make them serve shifters in his empire.”

“But it’s not just our continent affected.” Henry shares bleakly. “Damon just opened a can of worms for every country on the planet. People all around the world are waking up to discover that creatures from their worst nightmares are real and living among them- that they have more money, power and influence than any humans. The fallout is going to be unimaginable.”

“It’s already utter chaos.” James reports gravely.”

Everyone, both shifters and humans are in a fault on panic, and there’s no controlling it. That’s why I was so late, I was trying to lead people to the coast but every ten feet we’d have to stop and hid from roving war parties belonging to both sides, and then more people would turn up begging to join us.

I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I can’t believe this” I breathe, feeling my knees go weak.

“Believe it.” Gabriel said, without ire. “This changes everything. And I think you were right, Ella.” The King is looking at me with determined calm. “We can’t afford to waste a single moment in this war. If there are things in your past that can give us answers... we need to find them as soon as possible.”