

## Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Chapter 183

Sinclair

My wolf is half-mad with guilt and worry. I've been waiting for Ella's call all day, but when the clock strikes four and I still haven't heard a peep from my mate, I call my father. The line rings for what feels like ages, but then Dad's familiar face appears on my screen. "Is she still asleep?" I inquire, before he even has a chance to greet me.

"I haven't seen her." Dad replies, his brow crinkling in the video. The image is jostling slightly, his background shifting and changing as he wheels himself forward with one hand. But I've been at the airfield all day. I'm just getting back to the palace now. I'll check on her now."

I gnash my teeth impatiently, not really wanting to talk about anything until I know how my mate is doing. Still, I ask, "How was it today?"

More of the same, I'm afraid." Dad reveals sadly.

The average number of refugees making the trip each day hasn't increased, but it hasn't decreased either."

What about their conditions?" I ask, weary to the bone amidst so much misfortune. "Are there more injuries? More unaccompanied pups?"

"Everything seems stable." Dad reports, but I can tell he doesn't consider this any victory. "How did it go with the FrostFang Alpha?")

"Well, I think." I answer, looking out the windows of my suite in the FrostFang pack's headquarters. A mountain range spreads out on the horizon, the majestic towers of volcanic rock covered in verdant peat moss. It's green and glorious, but there are almost no trees. I feel a deep pang as I think about the dense forests back home, wondering how these wolves can be so content without any woodlands.

Gabriel said Alpha Aiden would be an easy sell, and so far he's been very supportive. He hasn't officially pledged his alliance, but I think we can count him among our friends at the summit.

"And you? How are you holding up?" My father inquires, a knowing timbre in his rich voice.

"It's cold up here, more like back home." I muse aloud, my train of thought momentarily derailed by my wolf's agitated energy. If Ella's still out I may let my wolf out for a run, he's been bloody stir crazy with all the travel and the situation with Ella isn't helping. He's on edge and I'm not going to be able to keep a handle on him much longer."

(You might consider doing that even if she is awake – before you two talk." Dad advises, but despite his wisdom I'm tracking the interiors of Gabriel's palace as he moves through the halls, measuring the distance between him and my mate. "Depending on how she's doing, seeing her might push you over the edge.")

I know you're right." I concede, "But I don't think I can stand it. It's one thing if she's still resting. it's another if she's trying to work through this alone."

Well the word around the palace is that she's a gift from the Goddess, sent to see us through the war."

Dad shares, his mouth twisting with wry humor. "It seems the guards who oversaw her hypnosis couldn't quite keep it to themselves. I promise you she'll have lots of support when she comes to."

He pushes into our suite, and I hold my breath, c0cking my ears for sounds of movement or tears.

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Dad pauses in the doorway of the bedroom, looking bemused. "Well she isn't here." He announces after a moment. He looks around, backtracking into the sitting room and switching the camera view so I can see his perspective. He lifts a cell phone from the coffee table, pressing the power button but only finding a black screen. "Her phone is here and dead."

My heart beats louder in my chest, and I smother a growl. "Okay, check with the guards – then try the kitchens, the nursery, Cora's rooms and the camp – in that order."

It only takes ten minutes to find my mate, but I'd be lying if I said I bore the wait well. My mind races with the unknown. Why didn't she call me the moment she woke? Is she alright? Maybe I should have called Phillippe – he won't have left her side.

Of course when my father wheels into the nursery, Isabel meets us at the door, her arms crossed over her chest. "Where have you been?" She demands.

That mate of yours has insured my pups will be up half the night! I tried to tell her they'd already napped but no, she couldn't resist."

A moment later I understand, because the video draws nearer and nearer to a masterful blanket fort as Dad crosses the room. And then she's there on my screen, curled up at the center of a puppy pile.

They surround her on all sides, arms and legs splayed over her body as she cuddles a little boy to her breast, lost in the tangle of limbs. My heart melts, and suddenly I don't care why she didn't call me. It's one of the sweetest scenes I've ever seen, and the last thing I want to do is disturb their slumber.

Unfortunately my mate seems to sense my virtual presence, because she blinks her gorgeous gold eyes a moment later and stretches like a sleepy kitten.

Her gaze lands on my face before she even looks at Dad, as if her instincts drew her to the phone in his hand like a magnet. Raw vulnerability transforms her features from sleep, as if she wasn't prepared to see me so soon, or face the feelings I naturally provoke. "Hello trouble." I greet huskily, "Did I interrupt your cuddle party?"

She peeks up at me from beneath her lashes, untangling herself from the pups enough to sit up glance warily at the other adults in the room. A I can see a hundred emotions flickering in the bottomless pools of her eyes before she pulls a curtain over her expression, erasing any hint of her true feelings.

She doesn't say a word, so I continue. How are you doing, little mate?" I inquire tenderly, "I've been worried about you."

Ella's eyes widen imperceptibly, and then she slumps back down against the piled pillows, "They told you." She moans, frustration and just a little resentment lacing her silken voice.

As I watch, I see her eyes jump somewhere above the screen, and I can imagine my father gesturing a warning to her. A wordless rumble rises in my chest,

"Should I take that to mean you planned on keeping it to yourself?" I inquire ominously.

Ella shivers at my dominant tone, "That isn't what I meant. )

(Dad, we need a moment alone." I state, "Can you please clear the room?"

Ella's eyes leap to the sleeping pups, clearly worried about waking them. "No – she object, at the same moment Isabel growls, "Absolutely not."

I'll go upstairs and call you from my phone." Ella offers, clearly not realizing the device is dead. When I tell her as much she responds that she'll sit beside the charger. I watch as she kisses the dozing children and extracts herself from the pile, then clambers up and disappears out the door.

I hang up with Dad, and a few minutes later my phone rings and Ella's face appears on the screen, beautiful and haunted. "Start talking, baby." I instruct, needing to know what she's thinking.

Ella reclines in her nest, the curtained walls casting her features in shadows. "I have too many questions to count." She admits, clearly deciding to skip over the difficult parts and avoid evoking the painful memories. "Who were those Priests? How did they know about me? Why did they say I needed to stay hidden? I don't understand any of it – the only thing that makes sense now is why everything changed. I was living without a critical piece of my soul for years, and the entire world became duller and emptier because of it."

I purr sympathetically. "I have those same questions," I relate, wishing I could touch her. "But right now I'm more concerned with how you're feeling, Ella."

She shrugs non committally, "Okay. I've been better." She mutters, "But I've also been worse."

"That isn't a real answer and you know it." I admonish, working to keep my voice soft and even "

Is that why you didn't call me? Why you wanted to keep it from me?"

"I didn't want to worry you." Ella replies thickly,

And you don't get to be mad about that because you do the same thing with me all the time," Her tone is petulant, but I can hear the tears in her voice even if I can't see them in the low light.

"How worried should I be, little wolf?" I rumble, " because I have to tell you, you seem awfully upset for someone claiming to be okay."

"I'm not upset." She insists, hiccuping and proving her words false. I'm just... " She trails off, her lip quivering.

"Just what, Ella?" I prompt, instinctively sensing that this is the true reason she avoided reaching out.

She can fake it with everyone else, but she can't fake it with me. I can read her like a book, and she knows it.

I scared Rafe." She admits miserably. "He's still not at ease, and I don't understand..." She sniffles, swiping at her cheeks. "If someone knew I was there .. if they knew I was suffering, then why did they leave me there? I could have been hidden anywhere ... but those priests must have known the kind of place the orphanage was." Her shining eyes glow up at the phone screen. "They said they were there to protect me... they were obviously wolves, why would they let the humans hurt me that way?"

I don't know, sweetheart," I croon, sending my purrs over the line. "But I promise we'll find out.