

Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Chapter 193

Ella

Things did not look better in the morning. At least, not for all the people back home in Moon Valley – shifter and human alike. With every day that passes, the worse the crisis grows, with refugees flooding out of the occupied territories and ever-rising death tolls. It feels insane that I'm one of the people in charge of solving this crisis, especially since I was just a Nanny a few months ago. It used to be that I would watch events like this unfold on the news and wonder what our world leaders were going to do to fix it... now I am one of those leaders.

The best I can do is take it one step at a time, and though I sometimes feel like I'm shirking my duties with the summit by focusing on the refugees so much, I feel like they need me most. It's difficult, draining work, but it's also more rewarding than I could imagine – even when things are tough.

And speaking of tough, there is one refugee in particular proving to be a tough nut to crack – not that this is surprising. "Isabel," I chime, striding into the nursery. The she-wolf looks up from the diaper she's changing, and her expression immediately becomes guarded.

Before I can reach her, a small herd of pups race forward to clamber around my legs, "Ella! Ella!"

There are fewer familiar faces here than before, since we've successfully placed a number of the orphans in foster homes. Still I continue coming every day to nap with the remaining children, and I love the time I spend with them.

"Luna." Isabel greets me stiffly, carrying over the child she'd been tending. I'm surprised to see it isn't Sadie, but when I search the room I spy James cradling the young girl by the fire, grinning down at her with obvious adoration. I can't help but raise my brows, as far as I know Isabel doesn't trust anyone with her precious charge, so it speaks volumes that she's relinquished her to the soldier.

The King tells me you rejected another foster home for Sadie." I explain, lifting one of the munchkins tugging at my skirt. "That's seven families you've passed up, you realize."

Isabel shrugs, not looking the least bit repentant. "I didn't like the look of them.

"And what exactly did you find so objectionable?" I ask suspiciously – the woman has come up with countless inane excuses to reject potential fosters.

«The mother smelled of cleaning chemicals and their own pups looked as though they'd been kept in a bubble their whole lives." Isabel explains haughtily.

"That mother works as a housekeeper, she can't help smelling a bit like the tools of her trade." I remind her, propping one hand on my hip and pinning her with a disapproving gaze. "Besides, two days ago you objected to a family because their pups had dirt on their shoes."

"It's about balance." Isabel insists obstinately. "I don't want Sadie to go to an unsanitary home, but I also don't believe children should grow up in completely sterile conditions – how is she supposed to build an immune system?"

"I think you are determined to find problems with everyone we bring to you, because you don't want to give Sadie up at all." I state sternly. "And that's okay. If you want to foster or adopt her yourself, I would be thrilled to help you do so. But don't keep the baby in limbo. If you're not going to commit to her then you need to give her to a family who will."

I can't adopt her." Isabel mutters, all the blood draining from her face. "But why can't I just keep her a while longer?"

"Isabel," I sigh gently. "Sadie lost her parents and she's bonding to you more and more every day.

She's getting used to her routine here and starting to feel comfortable in the nursery. Those are all good things if we can keep that going... but if we can't... The last thing she needs is to get attached to another parent figure only to have them taken away.

That's not what I want." Isabel answers, her eyes shining as she looks toward the child in question.

James raises his head as if he senses her gaze, frowning when he sees her sorrowful features.

"Do you want to tell me why you're so opposed to taking her in, when you obviously love her?" I prompt, sensing that I already know the answer.

"I don't love her!" Isabel snaps defensively. "It's not the same... I can't..." She bites down on her lip, then glares at me. "Why are you doing this?"

(I'm trying to do what's best for everyone – you included." I share, "I want to see you happy, Isabel.

I know that feels impossible right now-)

"Shut up!" She cries, interrupting me and stomping her foot in fury.

A gasp goes around the pups, and the little one perched on my hip whispers, "She said a bad word!"

(You don't know what you're talking about – you have no idea what I've been through!" Isabel continues, pointing an outraged finger at me.

Happiness is... that's done for me! I can't ever have it again, nor should I! So get your annoyingly perfect nose out of my business and leave me alone!" With that she turns on her heel and storms off into her room. The door slams, and then the sound of her sobs float out to us.

I wipe tears out of my own eyes as the pup in my arms cuddles closer. "Is okay, don't cry."

(Why's Miss Isabel so sad?"" Another asks, looking up to me with wide eyes and the expectation that I hold all the answers.

Footsteps approach, and then James's voice murmurs, "Because Miss Isabel lost a baby and she misses her." He explains softly, easing Sadie into my arms. "Let me talk to her, okay?"

I nod, "I'll watch the pups."

I try not to listen as he follows the distraught she-wolf, but with my supernatural hearing, there's no avoiding this. The door opens then shuts, and I can imagine him standing over Isabel as she sprawls miserably on her bed.

"Go away." Isabel sobs pitifully, her voice muffled – perhaps by pillows.

"No." James counters firmly. We're going to talk about this, Isabel."

I don't want to." She objects, and I hear a soft thump as though she slammed her fist into the bedding.

"No, you just want to make yourself miserable."

James answers, and the bed squeaks as he sits down.

You think if you let yourself be happy then it means you didn't love your daughter. You think that adopting Sadie is the same as replacing her, forgetting her, as if loving another child would be disrespecting her memory."

"Because it would!" Isabel whines. "I don't want another pup, I want my Sophie!"

I know you do." James acknowledges in a low purr, But you want Sadie too. And more importantly, Sadie needs a mother. So if you can't do this for yourself, then do it for her."

Isabel just moans wordlessly, and James seems to lose his patience. Come here, you stubborn thing."

There's a slight scuffle, with feminine snarls and the snapping of teeth, but soon enough Isabel's struggles cease, her defiant limbs no doubt captured by the pilot's powerful arms. His steady voice continues, "If you want to honor Sophie, the best thing you can do is not let your love go to waste.

Imagine if this was the other way around, and you had died with your mate, and Sophie was all alone in the world ->

I wish I had." Isabel weeps, "I wish it had been me instead of her. It should have been me."

(I know." James croons, rocking her, kissing her hair. "But if Sophie were all alone in the world, you would want someone to love her as if she was their own.)

(I didn't protect her." The she-wolf keens, and I find myself choking back my own sobs, snuggling close to the pups around me as I recall the visceral pain of thinking I'd killed my baby. It gives me the barest bit of insight into how the other woman must be feeling, and the gravity of her grief tears me to pieces.

"But you can still protect Sadie." James proclaims, I promised her mother I would look after her, but I can't take her with me on evacuation runs, or wear a baby carrier into battle. So I left her with you because I knew there was no one better. I believed you would watch over her as well as her own parents. Are you going to prove me wrong, Isabel She hiccups, "You're not playing fair."

"And you need to understand that shutting off your heart is a greater disservice to your daughter's memory than anything else. As long as you hurt, as long as you miss her, your love lives on. But if you stop feeling, if you stop caring then you let that love go to waste." James advises.

"If I adopt her, does that mean you'll finally stop visiting? Since your promise to her parents will have been fulfilled?" There's both hope and fear in Isabel's voice, as if she's trying to convince herself she doesn't want him around, even though she's afraid he might actually say yes.

(Not on your life." James chuckles, You can't get rid of me that easily, little wolf."

Well I'll adopt her anyway." Isabel agrees, sounding sullen. James purrs, and Isabel grumbles in return, but the sound is soon replaced by a whimper, and I have a sneaking suspicion that he silenced her in the way of all bossy Alphas – with his lips, and tongue, and wickedly talented hands.