

Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Chapter 180

Ella

"It's all right, Ella" The first priest says, approaching me as one might a skittish horse with slow, measured movements and hands exposed to show he holds no weapon. "We only want to protect you."

"Protect me from what?" I question shakily, my back flush against the locked door.

"You have a very powerful magic inside you, and if it's allowed to come out you'll be exposed. We can't let that happen." He explains, using a tone much too gentle to be trustworthy. It's as though he's trying to trick me, to convince me he's kind when he truly intends malice.

"I don't have any magic." I insist, wishing that I did.

Maybe if I was magic I might be able to put a stop to the things happening here – to protect the others without bringing harm to myself. I was so preoccupied with this statement that I almost missed the second piece of information. "Exposed to what?"

"You do, it just hasn't shown itself yet." The second priest sighs, keeping his distance but watching me with sharp eyes. "At least not in ways you understand. Tell me, have you never noticed how much stronger you are than your peers? That you can hear and smell things from much greater distances? That you can run faster, jump higher,- suffer greater injuries with less pain?" He inquires, his hawkish gaze searing into me, "do they not follow you? Gravitate to your side and obey you as a leader?"

My head spins, making me dizzy with the possibilities. He guesses correctly, but that can't be because I have some sort of special power. It's just the way things are, isn't it?

"And exposed to a world you cannot yet join." The first man adds. "It must happen when the time is right- but that time is a very long way off."

I don't understand." I squeak, a sense of pure dread settling in the pit of my stomach

"We know, Ella" The second man proclaims, "And I'm sorry that this must happen, it will not be pleasant, but it is necessary for the future of our people..."

I shake my head, fighting back tears. Their words are triggering every alarm bell in my young mind I know what men do to little girls under the guise of necessity, the pretense of helping or protecting.

And I know exactly how unpleasant things can get. My blood runs cold, and my pulse races, triggering a strange new energy deep in my bones. It pulses through me like a bolt of electricity, a wild thing writhes just beneath my skin, feral and rabid – begging to be free. "No, go away!" I hiss, my body shuddering with these new sensations.

The men look at each other with grim determination. "Her timing was spot on – another week and we'd be too late."

"I'm sorry, child." The first priest professes gravely, closing the distance between us. "We would not do this if there was another way."

Raw terror, unlike anything I've ever experienced before, takes over my senses. My instincts are screaming at me to run, to get away at any cost.

They tell me that whatever these men intend will be far worse than anything the doctor or dormitory matron have ever inflicted on me. But there isn't anywhere to run. I've got a bolted door at my back and two attackers far larger and stronger than I am bearing down on me. I try to scream, but the second priest clamps his hand over my mouth before the sound can escape. I sink my teeth into his palm, but he doesn't even flinch. He simply wrenches me away from the door, propelling me further into the room.

The first man grabs my legs, and I'm lifted off the ground. I thrash violently against their hold, my screams muffled and garbled as the priest continues to smother me. His blood seeps into my mouth, the metallic tang fanning the flames in my already sour stomach. My gorge rises, and I'm gagging, fighting for air and struggling to focus on my escape. I don't know what to do or how to fight them – I'm powerless in their strong grips, and they seem completely unaffected by my attacks. I might as well be a feather swaying in the wind for all the effort they expend to contain me.

A distant keening pierces the air, sounding very far away. The cries are deeper than my own, thick with grief and pain more complex than the sheer fright in my own panicked screams.

"Leon," A deep voice, tinged with concern, joins the terrible sounds. "It's too much."

"Just a little more." A second voice, floating above me, replies. "We're so close."

I have no idea where these sounds are coming from, and the priests don't seem to hear them at all. They continue with their task with single-minded focus, and I'm nothing more than a pawn in their game – tiny and helpless to stop them.

I'm thrust onto the floor and pinned down. The first priest restrains my wrists while the other sits on my kicking legs, pulling his tool bag to his side.

He extracts a shimmering silk cloth, it's pearlescent sheen glimmering like moonlight, glowing in the darkness. It looks soft and airy, but when they begin wrapping it around my body, it tightens around me with the unyielding force of steel. They enclose me in the fabric, winding it round and round like a glittering cocoon.

Once my arms are locked against my sides and my legs tightly shut, I'm completely immobile. I can't move a muscle in the fabric's punishing grip, and soon they're wrapping my head, as if they intend to mummify me alive. Just before the silk falls over my mouth, the priest finally removes his hand from my mouth. A half second of my scream escapes before the moonlight closes over my gaping lips, locking my face into the contours of a silent scream. I'm able to breathe, though I don't understand how.

It's one of my nightmares come to life – my mind is awake but I'm trapped in my own body, unable to move or speak. I can only lie there motionless, my brain screaming at my nerve endings and muscles to move, to do something – anything! But nothing happens because this isn't a dream from which I can wake, this is real, and it's only the beginning.

I can hear the priests rummaging around outside the walls of my silken prison, and I strain to identify the sounds: the clink of glass? The jostling of beads? A bottle uncorking? For all the fabric's strength, it does not stop me from feeling or smelling. My nose is filled with some pungent, herbaceous fragrance a moment before drops of moisture seep through the silk and onto my skin.

Light objects are laid over my body, stones or crystals placed in deliberate patterns on my head, chest, arms and legs. I'm still desperately trying to fight the cocoon, that foreign electricity in my veins warning me that I won't be able to fight much longer. Somehow, I know I'm running out of time, but I refuse to give up hope for escape.

The priests begin to chant then, speaking a language I do not recognize. Their words swirl around the small room, carrying arcane power older than the world itself. There was only darkness a moment ago, but now blinding light explodes in my vision, blinding me – but I can't close my eyes against it. The light is so searing that pain stabs in my head, and I'm sure I'll never see again.

Soon I realize that the light is the least of my worries. Fire is traveling along the inside of the fabric – but the silk does not burn, only I do. It blazes so hot that I'm sure any tears lingering on my cheeks will evaporate on the spot, I can feel my skin blistering, bursting until the flames can move on to charring my flesh and muscles. I'm dying...

I'm sure of it. I'm dying and I'm not going to escape. There won't be anyone left to protect Cora and the other children, they'll be alone and defenseless.

That same wild energy surges forward, and the priests lose their rhythm momentarily, their chant stuttering before regaining it's droning force. I try to send another surge, but something is tearing inside of me, more painful even than the flames.

"Leon, I'm serious now, bring her out." The man is angry now, furious. And the woman is still screaming, her voice hoarse with the effort. "We know what they did, it's time to stop. She can't take any more."

"I'll get the antidote." The second voice agrees.

I'm breaking, unraveling, and with a violent wrench, my soul is ripped in two. The pain disappears, the light goes dim, but my chest feels hollow. There is no more power pulsing through my veins, and only now that it's gone can I recognize that it was there in the first place. I've lost something sacred and integral to my being, though I don't know what. I simply know I am no longer whole.

The priests speak softly as they unwrap me, "She was stronger than I expected... remarkable really."

My face is uncovered, and though I was certain I'd been burnt to a crisp, I feel cold air against my tearstained skin, though I no longer have the will to cry. I stare blankly at the ceiling above me, until one of the withered faces moves into my line of sight. "It's all over now." The priest assures me, sounding regretful, "We'll take away the memory too. You won't have to remember this, little one"

His face blurs as a needle pinches my arm, and I return to the present.