

## Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Chapter 182

Ella

I sleep through the night and well into the next day.

My mind is foggy when I wake, and it takes a moment for everything to come rushing back to me. I wince as the memories of my hypnosis session take hold, and my first thought is of Rafe. I tap into our bond. The tiny being is asleep, but I can feel the lingering stress and fear clinging to his consciousness. I cradle my belly in my arms, feeling a new depth of sorrow for causing my child pain – beyond regret, sadness or guilt.

The force and scale takes me by surprise, and I know I have to work on controlling the feelings I send through our bond. Suddenly I understand only too well why Sinclair holds bad feelings back from me, and though I don't like being kept in the dark, I don't think he's wrong either. In fact, I'm glad my mate is far enough away that he couldn't feel my fear and pain yesterday too.

It would have affected him so much more than it did Henry, and he has more than enough to worry about as it is.

I take a bubble bath, and as I rest in the steaming water my pup stirs, fluttering in my womb and emitting a pulse of cautious energy...

He's still wary, still confused and upset by what he heard and felt during my trance. "Hello sweet pup." I hum, stroking my navel and wishing I could rock him in my arms already. "It's okay, everything is okay." I send all the affection, solace and calm I can summon down to him, and he relaxes, his miniscule fingers clutching at the wall of my uterus as if he's reaching for me. I rest my hand on the opposite side of his, singing a soft lullaby and wishing I had a male's ability to purr.

I think Rafe feels the same way, because a moment later he sends a fuzzy, half formed memory to me – of large, protective hands and a deep rumbling sound, the thing that comforts us both more than anything else. A tug of longing accompanies the hazy thought, and I realize he misses Sinclair.

I know, my love. I miss him too." I share, pausing my singing for a moment as I struggle to hold back my own pining. I want nothing more than to feel Sinclair's touch, to hear his beloved voice murmuring comfort in my ear – even from hundreds of miles away. At the same-time, I can't bring myself to call him. If I do, I know he'll sense that something is wrong, and I'm not going to distract him from the war effort by making him worry I can't handle a few memories. After all – I lived through these things, if I was able to survive them then surely I can survive remembering them.

So I pull myself out of my bath and get dressed, switching to a flowing maxi dress when I realize my maternity jeans are too tight now to fit over my hips and belly. "Are you having a growth spurt, munchkin?" I ask my pup, excited and pleased that he's getting bigger and stronger.

Just remember that Mommy is a lot smaller than Daddy, so don't go getting too big, okay?" I add, remembering the birthing class where they told us to expect twelve pound babies. I wonder if I would have grown into a taller, larger woman if my wolf hadn't been bound, but I suppose there's no way to know now.

When I walk out of my room, intending to take my growling stomach down to the kitchens for a snack, my guards straighten up and puff their chests out, as if they want to look as large and powerful as possible. It's a bit odd, but I don't think anything of their behavior until I get downstairs and feel all the eyes following me through the palace, and all the hushed murmurs circling in my wake. I catch a few snippets of the whispers, my heart sinking when I hear the words, priests... her wolf was bound...so many years,"

Apparently everyone knows what happened during my hypnosis, and as much as I want to curl in on myself to hide from the scrutiny of so many strangers, I notch my chin up and ignore them. It isn't until I hear another snatch of speech nearer the kitchens that I realize their tones aren't pitying or condescending, but reverent. "How did she survive?... Chosen by the Goddess... blessed."

If I thought things would be better once I reached the service level of the palace, I was sorely mistaken. If anything I draw more attention, and when I walk into the kitchens I cause quite the commotion. At once I'm being guided into a chair and plate upon plate of food is being set in front of me, eager cooks and maids murmuring their admiration and asking me to name any dish or delicacy, promising to whip up whatever I desire. I smile and thank them, insisting I don't need anything special. Still, the head Chef, an older woman with a no nonsense attitude, refuses to let me leave until I've told her my favorite meal, promising to cook it for supper this evening, I oblige, then quickly retreat to the orphan's wing. If there's anyone I can count on not to treat me differently – whether with awe or pity – it's Isabel.

She doesn't disappoint, as I enter she arches a sardonic brow. "Well if it isn't Saint Ella."

I smile, feeling a rush of fondness for the prickly woman. This is why I like her. She gives me no judgment, no pity and no fawning. She sees me exactly the same way she did yesterday, and I need that when I hardly recognize myself anymore. "Good afternoon, Isabel." I greet warmly. There's a baby wrapped in a sling against her chest, and I move forward to admire the child. Sadie stares up at us with wide blue eyes, and I stroke a finger over her cheek. How's she doing?"

She's getting spoiled rotten." Isabel remarks dryly, her tone masking the deep affection I know she feels for the infant. "She always wants to be held and wails like a little banshee if she's put down even for a moment."

"What a lucky girl that you're here to serve her every whim." I tease, strolling around to check on the other pups. Even with the children we've been able to foster with local families, the planes keep bringing more, and the nursery is growing to be too large for one woman to wrangle alone.

We've had a few more volunteers from the city express interest in helping here. If you had more hands on deck, you could take turns with Miss Spoily there." I offer, nodding towards Sadie and watching Isabel's expression closely. Her eyes narrow and I add, "or they could free you up so you can devote your time to the pups who need the most attention."

Isabel wraps a protective arm around Sadie's back, and I know I've read her correctly. She's clearly attached to the pup. (I'm not going to let just anyone come in here." She counters stiffly.

I would have to interview them."

"That can be arranged." I promise, grinning at a toddler who's just woken from his nap and is now standing at the bars of his crib, begging to be picked up. I pull him into my arms, kissing his chubby cheeks. "Well hello there, handsome. Did you have a nice nap?"

He giggles as I bounce him in my arms, but his laughter dies away quickly, as if he's remembering something unpleasant. "I don't like naps." He whispers sulkily.

Really?" I ask, making my voice sound shocked.

I love naps. Naps are the best."

He looks at me curiously. "You take naps?"

"Of course I do, whenever I can." I share, studying his small face as his features settle into a frown.

"Mommy naps too." He tells me a minute later, looking grim but hopeful. Is she here?"

"No angel." I sigh, cuddling him a bit closer. He leans his cheek against my shoulder, sniffing softly. "Did you used to nap with your Mommy?"

I ask. Do you not like them anymore because she isn't here to snuggle with you?"

He nods pitifully, and I rub his back. I catch Isabel watching us with a look of abject despair, but she covers it quickly, turning away. Well I'll tell you what. I know I'm not as good as your Mommy, but I'll nap with you if you want?"

He nods again, and I give him a squeeze, trying to pour all the love in my heart into his small body. I feel a tug on my dress, and I look down to find another pup hovering at my side. This one is a little girl around four, and she's looking up at me like she's not sure if I'm real. "Can I naps with you too?" She asks shyly, "I have bad dreams when I sleeps alone."

"Of course." I promise, soon met with a chorus of, "Me too? What about me? Can I?" I look around at the other pups and realize they've been listening all along, and they're all wearing similarly hopeful expressions. "I'll tell you what, why don't we make a nice big blanket fort, and every afternoon when I take my nap, anyone who wants to come cuddle will be welcome? How does that sound?"

A chorus of approval meets my ears, and I send the guards at the door to gather extra blankets and pillows, and the little girl clutching my skirt says, "My big sister says you're a Princess, and the Goddess sent you to us. Is she right? Is it really true?"

Isabel snorts at my surprised expression.

Rumors reach the nursery just as fast as they do the rest of the palace. Did you really think they wouldn't know?")

"I am no Princess," I tell the child. And I don't know the Goddess's plans any more than you do little one."

She will be better than a Princess." Isabel interjected, gentling her tone for the child.

When her mate leads his army back home and overthrows the tyrant, she will be Queen." I'm taken aback by the firm conviction in her voice, as if she is looking forward to this future. Her icy gaze meets mine, and I see it is more than mere conviction, it's closer to a demand. I realize she believes in Sinclair and me, we've given her hope when she wanted none, and now she's going to hold us to it. She won't stand for being let down, and that is the last thing I want to do.

If there are more secrets waiting in my past, I have to continue searching for them. I need answers if I am to do right by Isabel and these pups, by all the shifters and humans suffering in this war. I am not eager to try hypnosis and ether again, but I can be brave for them – if not for myself.