

Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Chapter 191

Ella

When I return to the present, the room is completely silent. Henry is still holding my hand, though he also holds a bucket in case I need to be sick. Leon is watching me closely, as if trying to decipher my mental state. Gabriel, Philippe and Roger look on from the doorway in a horrified hush. I hadn't been wild about having them here with me during such a vulnerable time, but in the end we agreed that we needed as many brains on the case as possible. Besides, I'm discovering that I don't really mind having so many friends on hand this really is a strange new world for me.

"Do you want me to bring you out of the ether, Ella?" Leon finally asks, and I realize that he hadn't been forced to give me the antidote this time. I'm still floating along under the influence of the drug, still in the safe embrace of the high despite the horrible things I've just remembered. I'm not feeling yet, not processing, and I don't think I want I shake my" updated by jobnib.com" head in refusal, moving my hand to my belly. The baby reaches out to me through our bond, uncertain and afraid. Had he understood my fear, my helplessness? Or did all he knew was that I was suffering? "Can I have something nice?" I request, not truly knowing what I want or need. "

Something for the baby?"

"I have just the thing," Henry replies, pulling out his phone. He presses a button, and then the sound of Sinclair's purrs fills the air. I forgot I'd sent him the recording my mate provided earlier today, but now I'm beyond glad of it. Rafe and I instantly calm, and though longing for Sinclair tugs viciously at my heart, I sink deeper into the plush sofa and try to lose myself in the cozy sound.

"Anything else?" Henry inquires, stroking my hair.

"Do we have any popsicles?" I sniffle, and for the first time I realize my cheeks are soaked with tears. For a moment I revel in the sensation of the salty moisture on my skin, of the burning in my eyes. Everything seems so different in this state, and I could spend hours exploring the feelings – if only I didn't have to dig into my past as well.

"I'll check the kitchens, and if they're out I'll get some." Roger promises, slipping out of the room.

"Let's talk about what just happened." Leon suggests once I've relaxed. Of course, this is the last thing I want to do, now that the memory is over I want to leave it in the past where it belongs

"Do we have to?" I inquire in a small voice, trying to disappear into the couch. Stupid sofa, my wolf thinks, I want my nest, why do we keep doing this here? It's all lumpy and there aren't nearly enough pillows Where am I supposed to be now?

"I think we should." Leon answers gently, interrupting my inner animal. "We didn't talk about our last session because it was so distressing, but you seem to be steadier now." He pauses, and when I don't respond he continues. "I know you're only doing this to find answers for the war, but my job isn't the answers, Ella – it's not even the war. My job is your mental health, it's helping you understand and deal with the things we discover in a productive way."

"Dominic wouldn't make me." I counter petulantly, reaching for Henry's phone so that I can balance the device on my tummy. The speaker thumps against my baby bump, the volume growing louder for my pup and allowing us both to feel the vibrations as if he were really here with us.

"I'm not sure that's true, little mother." Henry warns me, in that paternal voice that both warms my soul and annoys my wolf for being bossy.

"I've been doing fine without this warlock's help."

I argue instead, and I hear Gabriel smother a snort of laughter.

You tell him. My wolf encourages. Nosey wolf.

Remind him that our mate could kill him with no more than his little finger if he wanted.

"Have you really?" Leon questions, not seeming the least bit bothered by my insult. "Just because you didn't remember these things, it doesn't mean they weren't hurting you – affecting the way you interact with the world."

"We don't have time for this." I insist. "I understand you want to help, but I'm more concerned with finding out who these priests are, why they keep turning up in my past."

"So you aren't bothered by the fact that you killed those men?" Leon prods curiously. "Did you know you were capable of such violence before, even in self defense? Did you imagine you would have such a skill for it?"

His words slice through me, and suddenly it feels as though I have ice in my veins. I did kill those men. I took their lives without a second thought, and with no remorse. They'd deserved it.. hadn't they? They were going to hurt me, rape me, sell me like chattel... but that doesn't change the fact that I murdered them. It's because of me that they no longer exist on this earth. Did they have families?

People who mourned them? Children I rendered fatherless – no! Stop this, it won't do any good.

"Talking about it won't change the past." I insist. "

It's done.

"You don't think it's worth exploring all the things you suffered because you didn't have your wolf to protect yourself, or because you were trying to protect the people you love?" Leon presses, and my frustration grows. "If it were me I think I'd feel very angry with those priests for taking my magic from me, for standing by and just watching as those men assaulted me."

"But it wasn't you!" I snap, more fiercely than I intended. I'm outraged to realize how furious I am, just as he says. Still, I lash my anger at him, rather than acknowledging the truth of his words "They assaulted me, the priests took my wolf. Stop presuming to know how I feel."

"So tell me." Leon provokes, "tell me how you feel, Ella, and I won't presume.

Roger returns then, and I hear the glorious crinkling of a popsicle wrapper. I accept the cold sweet eagerly, rejoicing as the flavors explode on my tongue. "Oh my goddess, this is the best thing I've ever tasted." I know it's the ether talking, but even that awareness slips away a minute later when neon-colored visions of frozen desserts appear on the ceiling above my head. While I get lost in the hallucination, I hear the others continue to talk.

The King sighs, and to my surprise, he speaks up in my defense. "Leon, I hate to say it because I know you were against having such a large audience in the first place, but if this is going to turn into a true therapy session then the rest of us probably shouldn't be here. As you said. that's not really why we came to you. If Ella doesn't want to do the work, you can't force her."

"I'm just trying to take care of my patient." Leon defends, sounding resigned. It's not safe or responsible to uncover these sorts of traumas with someone – only to cut out and leave them to deal with it on their own. It would be like a doctor performing surgery and then never doing any post-op checks or physical therapy. If Ella wants these answers, she needs to face them afterwards, not just ignore them."

"I understand." The King agrees, "And you're right, but these aren't regular circumstances."

"She's been through a lot." Henry adds, "And she's dealing with a lot now. I have to admit I worry what might happen if you start digging into all this when she's under so much stress as it is"

"The digging is already done." Leon corrects him "

These things aren't just going to go away. Do any of you know how she's actually been coping since the first session? How she's been feeling?"

"You know I can hear you." I pipe up, suddenly very conscious of Philippe opening his mouth and worried he'll rat me out about my nightmares. "I'm not a child and I might be high but you don't have to talk about me as if I'm not here. It's very patronizing" I continue savoring my popsicle as I forge on. "I'm pretty sure I've already made my feelings on this clear – and I'm the patient, so it's my choice."

"Fine." Leon concedes, sounding annoyed and exasperated. "But mark my words, you're courting disaster." He strides over to me, and I blink up at the grumpy therapist. "Ella I hope you'll call me to talk when you come down from the ether. You can call me any time, when you're ready I'll be waiting" He departs without another word, and I look around at the gloomy faces of the remaining men.

"So what do we think?" Roger asks after a moment.

"What was that memory all about? Why would servants of the Goddess do such a thing?"

"They were testing her." Henry concludes grimly.

"Testing her for what?" Gabriel replies sounding confused.

"To see if she was worthy? If she could survive?"

Henry suggests, not sounding particularly confident with these explanations. "Perhaps to see if she was ready."

"For what?" The King presses.

"I have no idea, but I can tell you if they ever turn up again, I'm going to have some words for them."

Henry snarls.

"Do you think there's more? More memories like this?" Gabriel questions then.

Henry sounds about as enthusiastic as an executioner signing a death warrant. "I hate to say it, but I'm afraid there are."