

Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 244 – Alliances

Ella

I stare at Henry in utter belief, my conversation with my impossible sister immediately slipping my mind. “You found her?” I gape, instinctively reaching for Cora’s hand. Her warm palm settles in mine, squeezing tightly.

“It wasn’t easy.” Henry admits, moving further into the room. “I reached out to every surviving contact I could think of, to no effect. Then I tried the news archives from the time, since they reported on the King’s death and Reina’s departure so thoroughly. They all said the same thing – that she was devoting herself to the Goddess, but none seemed to know where she was going to serve.”

“So how did you figure it out?” Cora asks, sounding every bit as excited as I feel.

“I followed the money.” Henry explains, in a statement so vague and cliched I could scream with impatience. “I had one of Gabriel’s computer forensic specialists hack into the royal banking records back home in Moon Valley. Luckily Damon hasn’t destroyed the financial archives dating back that far.” He shares eagerly. “He discovered that Queen Reina purchased a one-way trip to the Altaran islands just before the King’s death.”

“The Altaran islands?” I ask, racking my brains to try and place this name.

“They’re a remote island chain between the hidden territories and the royal continent,” Henry tells us, “so remote that all but the largest island are completely uninhabited. And the big island is only home to one thing: the most sacred temple known to shifters. It’s considered so hallowed that they don’t even allow pilgrimages to the site, only the most devout and worthy priests and priestesses are permitted to serve there.”

I press my hand to my racing heart, “so Reina wouldn’t be going there unless she intended to devote herself as a priestess.”

“Exactly,” Henry smiles, “and the fact that she was even allowed to go indicates that her journey was Goddess-blessed.”

“So how do we get there? How long will it take to reach the islands?” I ask, my blood feeling positively electric.

“You’ll have to go by ship.” Henry tells us with a small frown. “You can’t fly in the third trimester and I don’t even know if there’s access from the air. Reina traveled by boat, so you will too.” He pauses meaningfully, “I have to tell you that Dominic isn’t going to like it, though. There aren’t any doctors or hospitals, no resources to help you if you encounter trouble.”

“Surely there can’t be safer hands than the Goddess’s,” I counter, practically bouncing up and down. “How long is the journey?” I ask again.

Henry chuckles, “If I were you I would try to show a bit more hesitation about the risks when you talk to your mate. But it will take no more than three days.”

“That’s amazing!” I burst, giving up the pretense of calm and throwing my arms around my sister. “I can’t believe you found her! I can’t believe I’m going to meet her!”

Cora hugs me back, and I’m beyond moved when she murmurs, “I’m so happy for you, Elle.”

“Henry, you should come with us!” I suggest, glowing with happiness. “You know Reina, and I couldn’t ask for a better travel companion.”

“Hey,” Cora objects in an offended tone.

“Except for Cora, but she’s already coming.” I amend, batting my lashes at my disgruntled sister.

To my surprise, Henry’s face falls. “Yes, I know Reina.” He says in a strange voice. “But if I’m being honest I’m not particularly eager to renew the acquaintance.”

At once I remember that my birth father is responsible for the death of Henry’s mate. I don’t have any idea if my mother was in on the plot, but it’s entirely understandable why Henry would want to keep his distance. “Oh Henry, I’m sorry. That was thoughtless of me.”

“Nonsense.” He waves my apologies away, wheeling forward to kiss my cheek. “Besides, Dominic needs me here – as an advisor. He’s already arranged for you to have plenty of protection and company, and I think he’s worried about being short-staffed as a result.” This is news to me and I don’t entirely understand his meaning, but I can’t bring myself to care right now.

“Have you told him the news yet?” I ask, secretly hoping that he has so that the duty doesn’t fall to me.

“No,” Henry grins, reading my sly expression. “That’s up to you, little mother.”

I nod, hugging him tightly. “Thank you so much, Henry.”

3rd Person

Damon stomped into his war room, raking his gaze over the scale model of the various battle fronts spread out on the center table. He growled with barely contained frustration, quickly losing control and slashing his arm over the tiny wax figures dotting the Southern border.

His troops had just called to report yet another loss – and to the humans of all people. It was one thing to be routed by the shifter resistance forces, but it was an insult to grievous injury to be defeated by such inferior beings. The furious emperor was ready to murder his war council, convinced that they’d do about as much good to him as corpses as they currently served as advisors.

Ever since the secrecy pack broke the humans had been an unforeseen and shocking complication. Sure, the same clowns who’d recommended he send his best troops to the Western front had cautioned him about the fallout, but who would have ever believed those neanderthals could mount a competent defense against his elite forces? It seemed the weak creatures had been investing in advanced weapons systems for years without making the information public, and they hadn’t hesitated to deploy them when faced with an existential threat.

For weeks Damon had been watching his forces dwindle beneath the two-pronged assaults of shifter and human armies – the only blessing was that the two sides had not united against their common enemy. Now, Damon didn’t particularly care about the death of his men – a soldier was little more than cannon-fodder after all – he had plenty more where they came from. The far greater blow was the impossibility of governance amidst the sheer chaos of the collapsing societies. He couldn’t get control of any town or city beyond Moon Valley, especially since he’d dismantled every institution and power structure that might impart order.

The fact of the matter was that Damon needed to put an end to the fighting and fast, or the continent he’d seized would be worthless by the time he finally established his rule. Moreover, he needed to do something about that bitch and Sinclair’s unborn pup in Vanara. He was thrilled to have Sinclair out of the way, but his widow was still a source of hope for the downtrodden, and his pup would likely grow into an indomitable challenger if given the chance.

Damon had been trying to reinstate contact with his assassin in Vanara ever since Sinclair’s death was confirmed, but the wolf seemed to be dodging his calls. Perhaps he’d discovered he enjoyed life in Vanara so much he didn’t need Damon’s favor any longer. But no matter the cause, Damon needed an ally in the hidden territories. His resources were so strained that he couldn’t afford to deal with the refugees on the coast, let alone get another spy over the border.

Instead he decided that it was time to take a page out of Sinclair’s own book.

Before they lost contact, his spy had shared that the Storm Forest Alpha, Kieran, was fiercely opposed to allying with Sinclair. The Alpha clearly had more sense than some of his countrymen, as he understood that humans were worth little more than slave labor, and made no bones about sharing this perspective.

In fact, Damon actually felt a sense of solidarity with the fierce leader. He’d been harboring these thoughts in privacy for some time, but now it seemed as if things were becoming truly desperate. He couldn’t continue to bear the burden of this fight alone. He’d thought Sinclair weak for seeking alliances, but perhaps the late wolf was more clever than he’d seemed.

It was time to make his move.

Damon found the phone number among his late father’s documents, practically salivating as he dialed. Damon held his breath as the line rang, silently praying for Kieran to pick up.

At last the shrill ringing ended in a click, “Hello?” A gruff voice sounded on the other end of the line.

“Is this Alpha Kieran?” Damon asked, trying to keep the excitement from his voice.

“It is,” the voice replied, sounding suspicious. “Whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

“This is Emperor Damon.” He replied, relishing the sound of his new title. “I have an offer to make you – an opportunity to increase your power and protect your lands from the scourge of refugees and human scum.”

Kieran contemplated this for a moment, but the suspicion was gone from his voice when he finally replied, replaced with avid interest. “I’m listening.”