

# Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 257 Altara

Ella

The floor of the ship's afterdeck bucks and reels on the rolling ocean waves, the deck surging up and falling beneath my feet. I grip the railing and try to breathe in the fresh sea air, keeping my eyes locked on the distant horizon. Cora appears by my side with a bottle of water. "How's the nausea?"

"You would think a ship this large couldn't be thrown around so easily." I chuckle in reply, gingerly sipping the water. It's our fourth day at sea, and I barely made it through the second afternoon before the swells became so rough that I began to feel ill. After my first bout of vomiting I fled our stuffy cabin and came up above deck which helped – but now I'm afraid to take my eyes off of the horizon, and the Goddess knows there isn't any land in sight to spot instead.

Cora laughs, "babe this tub is a drop in the bucket." She reminds me, patting the side of the silver watercraft. "Besides, they warned us these seas are rough."

I groan, taking another drink. "How much longer?"

Her face lights up, "I just came from the wheelhouse, the captain says we should be able to sight the islands within the hour!"

That gets my attention. I straighten up immediately, trying to shake off my malaise. Adrenaline rushes up to beat back some of the illness, and I find myself inspecting my clothing for wrinkles and stains. Maybe it's utter insanity, but if I'm going to be meeting my mother today I want to make a good impression, even if I am five months pregnant, sick to my stomach and fleeing a war zone.

"Easy now, it'll be a few hours yet." Roger chides, coming to stand on my left. He leans on the railing mirroring Cora, who determinedly ignores him. "We'll have plenty of time to make ourselves presentable after we've docked."

That does settle my wolf a bit, but I wish Sinclair was here. I pull out my phone and turn on the recording of his purrs, feeling some of my tense muscles unwind as soon as I press play. My nerves have been absolutely fried since we separated. On one hand this is to be expected – given the seriousness of our situation. However, something tells me that my anxiety is less about the wolf I left in Vanara, and more about the woman for whom I'm headed. Afterall, I know Sinclair loves me almost too much. I have no idea how my mother feels about me, and I've been

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dreaming of her for as long as I can remember.

I peek at my sister. "So... do you hate me?" I ask, pulling her attention away from Roger.

Cora, who was thoroughly occupied staring daggers at the wolf, gradually drags her attention to my face. Her brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, we spent our whole lives wishing for parents." I sigh, searching my sister's lovely face. "if the situation were reversed I think I'd feel pretty jealous."

"I mean I am." Cora shrugs, having the grace to look slightly abashed. She wraps her arm around me and rests her head on my shoulder. "But I'm happier than I am jealous – I want this to be everything you've been hoping and waiting for, Ellie."

For one moment, I forget we aren't alone. Roger and the sailors fade into the background, and then it's only Cora and me, looking out at the deep blue water surrounding us on all sides. I snuggle into my sister's warmth, needing to feel her affection as I contemplate the uncertainty awaiting us. I inhale a shaky breath, "What if she doesn't like me?" I whisper, in an impossibly small voice.

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Roger has the decency to make himself scarce as Cora pulls back from me in surprise. "Ella, what are you talking about? This woman prayed and prayed for you for years! She wanted a child more than anything and then she didn't even get to raise you, if anything I expect she's going to like you too much."

I'm not ashamed to say that I let this fantasy take hold of my mind for a minute. I picture myself arriving at an ethereal temple by the coast, and a beautiful woman in long robes running towards me with open arms. I imagine feeling her embrace... my mother's embrace, and I shudder. "I'm afraid to hope." I admit, gnawing on my lower lip. "It's so much easier with the war because as horrible as things are, I've only been caught up in this for a few months I mean it hasn't even been a year, Cora!"

"I know." She nods in understanding, rubbing my back. "And you've been holding out hope for parents for the better part of 30 years." A hard edge enters her usually soft voice. "It's much easier to believe in the things you haven't already seen played out a hundred times before."

I blink the tears from my eyes to study Cora's countenance, which remains drawn and sober. There's something so lost in her deep brown eyes, and I realize she's probably feeling about as raw as I am right now. I may be vulnerable and on-edge, but she sounds so disconsolate that I simply can't bear it. "I'm really rich now, you know." I tell her with a sly smile. Cora blinks in confusion, "I'm sorry, do you want me to hate you?"

"No!" I laugh, rolling my eyes. "I'm saying that I could hire an investigator... if you want to find your family."

Cora's face lights up for a second, then quickly falls. "No." She answers shortly, and I wonder if she's talking to me or her own conscience. "I hate to say it, sis. But I think we've maxed out our miracles." 1

"You never know, just look at what happened with me." I encourage, knowing I'm walking a thin line now. I want to help my sister, but I also don't want to be cruel by giving her false hopes.

"You also happen to be a she-wolf with the Goddess's own blood in your veins." Cora counters, a note of derision in her voice. "Somehow I doubt things will turn out so well for me."

"I'm sorry, Cora." I proclaim sincerely, "I wasn't trying to rub your face in my good fortune." (1

"It's okay," Cora exhales, her entire body softening as she wraps me in a hug. "I know you were only trying to help, but I came to terms with the fact that I will never know where I came from a long time ago. Being reminded... it only hurts." She has to bend over my swollen belly in order to properly embrace me, and her voice is full of warmth when she finally pulls back. "But Ella, your mother is going to love you so much. Just think, all those years you were waiting for her and not knowing if she was even out there... well she was waiting for you too, probably counting down the days until she finally got to meet you, knowing you were out there but forced to stay away."

My heart swells in my chest, and I cling to my sister, nuzzling her shoulder. "Maybe we can share her." I suggest, "If she's like me then she probably wanted lots of babies. I bet she'd adopt you."

"Thank you." Cora laughs, "But we should probably wait and see what she's like before we decide to make any offers.

I scoff, "hey it's a good deal. Two awesome daughters for the price of one."

"Oh, I'm sorry, is she buying you now?" Cora teases. "With what money? She's been living in a wolf convent for the last five years."

"She was a queen." I respond, my eyes narrowed. "She probably has it stored away somewhere."

"Yeah, or she donated it like most people when they join a religious sect." Cora responds with amusement.

"Fine, she won't buy us!" I finally surrender, "it was just an idea."

"A ridiculous idea." Cora laughs, and I squeeze her even more tightly.

"I'm sorry to interrupt ladies," Roger says, stepping close enough to drag our attention away from one another. "but if you want to go to the bow, land has been sighted. The navigator confirmed it's the Altaran islands."

Before the words are even out of his mouth, Cora is gripping my arm and pointing into the north, her face alight with excitement. "Ella, look!"

A group of islands appear so suddenly on the horizon that I have to wonder whether or not they might have been pulled up straight out of the sea for our benefit. They're dark and jagged and entirely too ominous, with black volcanic beaches and jagged peaks thrusting skyward, lined with spiraling cliffs. My heart races the closer we come, and soon the islands are not merely blurry shadows, but solid, stark and in high contrast to the endless ocean.

And there, on the distant shore, stand three figures in long robes – waiting.

It seems to take a lifetime for our ship to moor, and another lifetime over by the time we've loaded into smaller boats to venture ashore. I recognize Reina as soon as I see her, standing tall and proud between the priests from my memories. If I expected her to greet me with tears or laughter, I was wrong.

Instead she merely looks at me with sharp, searching eyes. They travel up my body, assessing me coolly as they finally rise to my face. "You're too late."