

Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 258 Queen Reina Ella

Of all the things I expected to hear when I met my long-lost mother for the first time, it certainly wasn't, "You're too late."

I stop dead in my tracks, glancing nervously at Cora, Roger and Philippe. We're barely out of the transport boats, and my bare feet are sinking into the dense black sand covering the beach. It slips between my toes, and I absentmindedly squidge them this way and that, enjoying the sensations while my brain tries to catch up.

"We're too late?" I finally repeat as our little party remains frozen at the edge of the waves, wondering if we might be sent back the way we came.

"You should have been here months ago." One of the priests announces grimly.

I recognize the man from my dreams, and suddenly my heart stops beating. His face is so familiar, and yet I doubt I'd be able to pick him out of a lineup. He's at once entirely unremarkable, yet impossible to forget. Cora leans into me, sensing my tension if not my malfunctioning heart. "I didn't even know this place existed until last week!" I say by way of explanation, my voice hoarse and wary. "I would have come sooner if I knew I was supposed to."

The three figures exchange dubious glances, and though my wolf refuses to take her attention off the priests, my other senses are completely distracted by my investigation of my mother. She smells familiar, but when I reach towards her with my thoughts, I come up against a blank wall. She's shutting me out. My heart sinks, and a new voice pulls my attention from Reina's beautiful face.

The second priest – also from my nightmares – grumbles, "Very well then, you'd better come in." We begin to move forward, but Reina stops us with a raised palm. "Just Ella." She orders, her voice soft and yet inarguable. "The rest of you will have to return to your ship."

"We're not leaving her." Cora objects, her hand wrapping tightly around my arm as if she fears they might attempt to take me by force.

"You'll have to." The first priest responds dryly. "This is sacred land. Only those blessed by the Goddess are permitted to enter, you risk grave misfortune by setting foot in her temple without invitation."

"Then we'll risk it." Roger bites back, stepping forward with utter authority. "We stay with Ella." Reina arches one blonde brow as she considers my mate's brother. After some contemplation, she concedes, "As you wish." One graceful palm is outstretched, welcoming our small group onto the island. "But no more, the rest of your crew will have to stay aboard."

The trio turn their backs and begin marching through the sand towards the temple. I stare at their retreating forms in shock, trying to wrap my head around this turn of events. They seem both entirely unsurprised and thoroughly underwhelmed by my arrival. Granted, I wasn't expecting fanfare or even a welcome banner, but I did assume we'd be received with warmth... especially by my mother.

She barely looked at me.

I feel a tugging at my elbow and realize Cora is trying to pull me forward. Meanwhile I'm standing here gaping like a fish, too stunned to move. "Come on, honey." Cora encourages softly, "let's get you off your feet."

Despite our chilly greeting, Queen Reina and the priests turn out to be generous hosts. They usher us into the temple and set us up in front of a blazing fire. A few novice priestesses carry in dishes piled high with food, as well as kettles full of tea and coffee.

I find myself shrinking next to Cora, increasingly ill-at-ease with every moment that passes. No one says a word. Reina and the priests seem perfectly content to wait until the servants have delivered everything and we're alone... unfortunately for them, I'm not so patient. "Would someone please tell us what's going on?"

"You don't know?" Reina inquires, setting down the steaming teapot in her hands.

"Well I thought I did!" I burst, still gripping Cora's hand. "I came here to find you and learn about my past and my powers, but now I'm only confused." I explain, "You seem to be expecting us, yet you tell us we're too late." I look to Reina now, trying not to show my hurt. "You're my mother, but you don't seem to care that I'm here!"

"That isn't true." Reina corrects me gently. "We're all very happy you're here, Ella. We're just worried. There's not much time left."

"That may be true, but it isn't my fault." I counter, crossing my arms over my chest, "You left me helpless, defenseless, with no possible tools or advantages in life. You didn't leave me a single hint about my true identity, so is it any surprise that it took me so long to figure it out?"

"No." The first priest concedes, bowing his head. "It isn't."

"Will you at least tell me your names?" I inquire, feeling far more bold than I did a few minutes ago, "I keep calling you one and two in my head and it's confusing."

"I'm Silas." The second priest offers me something akin to a smile, "and this is Pollux."

"You two," I accuse hoarsely, not sure where I'm headed with this, or why it's coming out now. "You bound my wolf, you tormented me."

"We also saved your life." Pollux points out, his dark eyes flashing.

"Did it ever occur to you that I might not have been broken enough to need saving if you'd protected me?" I demand harshly, trying and failing to get to my feet. Instead my ungainly belly topples me right back into my chair.

"Just stay down, babe." Cora murmurs in my ear. "You're more intimidating seated than standing at this point."

I glare at her over my shoulder, before extending a hand to Roger with a pleading expression. He helps me to my feet, and I begin to pace. "All this time I've been asking myself why I was being punished, why I was being tested." I turn my focus to Reina, "I've waited 30 years to find out where I came from, and now I finally find you and it's like.." I trail off, pulling out my phone so I can play the recording of Sinclair's purrs. If this is confusing for Reina and the Priests, they give no hint. Instead they wait until my breathing has gone from heaving gasps to steady exhales, and I summon my remaining patient. "I just want answers. I just want to know who I am and what I'm supposed to do in this war. Where in the world do I belong?"

I don't realize I'm crying until Cora scrambles up and wraps herself around me, making soft shushing sounds. "You belong with me, Ella. If nowhere else, you belong with me, and Dominic and Henry..."

"You belong right here among the Goddess's most honored servants." Reina interrupts, earning a vicious glare from Cora. "Surely you must realize you are no ordinary woman."

"But I am." I insist, clutching my sister. "Do you think you can erase so much hurt with a few divine gifts? Do you believe that beauty or wealth can undo the crimes committed against me?"

"You are not ordinary, Ella." Reina repeats firmly. "Perhaps you are in matters of the heart, but you certainly aren't when it comes to lineage and power."

"Well what good does that do anyone, if I'm too late?" I inquire, trying to get my raging emotions under control. "Are we bound to fail now?" Tears steam from my eyes as I contemplate this possibility for the first time. "Are... are you telling me I'm too late to help us win? To save the packs?"

The priests exchange unreadable glances. "Not necessarily. We didn't mean to make it sound so final." Pollux explains. "None of us know what the future holds, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried."

"We're sorry for what you have suffered, Ella." Silas offers, sounding sincere despite his austere expression. "And we're sorry that this meeting isn't what you expected. It's clear there have been a few misunderstandings, but the important part now is that you're here. We just have to do our best and hope that it's enough."

I shake my head, feeling completely adrift and longing for my mate so fiercely I could scream. I reach for him through our bond, even though I know he's much too far away to feel me. My tugs on the connection come up empty, but I notice that I can feel his absence. It's like a hole in my chest that can't be filled again until he returns. But it is there. Whereas, with Queen Reina, I don't feel anything at all – not even an absence of what should be.

I turn to Reina, realization dawning. "We aren't bonded." I assess, wrapping my arms around myself. "Are we?"

"No." Reina confirms gravely, and I see a flash of pain in her eyes. "Ella, you have to understand that I only carried you... I was never your true mother."

"I don't understand." Tears burn my eyes, "If you're not my mother then who is?"

"Sweetheart." Reina leans forward to take my hands in hers. They're warm and soft, but I feel no greater energy, no sign that we might have a connection beyond that of strangers. "Your mother – your only mother, is the Goddess."