

Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 259 Answers at Last

Ella

“You’re not my mother?” I whisper, my voice positively tiny.

Looking at Reina, it makes sense. She’s tall and willowy, with black hair, olive skin and dark eyes – just about my polar opposite. I’m recalling Henry telling me that I don’t resemble her or Xavier, so I must take after the Goddess, but I didn’t truly understand how great the dissimilarity was until this moment. It seems a silly question now; of course she’s not my mother. How could she be?

The weight of my crushed hopes batter me from every direction, as if they aren’t simply falling from above, but closing in around me, suffocating and strangulating. They’re all watching me with the same sympathetic expression: Reina, the priests and Roger. Only Cora refuses to pity me, choosing instead to offer our hosts a death stare for upsetting me.

“Ella, please sit down.” Reina pleads, pulling me back over to the fire. “If you’ll listen, we’ll explain everything.”

“Okay. I manage to utter weakly, reclaiming my seat. “Explain.”

Reina clasps her hands in her lap, taking a deep breath. “When I married Xavier, I had my entire life planned out. I would finish school, wait a year or two before trying for pups, maybe work a little. All in all I expected to spend the first years of my union learning to be a queen and preparing to ascend to the throne in another decade or so. Then Xavier’s father died suddenly and unexpectedly, and all at once my plans fell apart. We were coronated when I was just 22.”

She pauses to sip her tea, and though the flavor is sweet her lips form a grimace. “Xavier and I chose one another. He’d rejected his fated mate and all his parents’ plans for an arranged marriage, and all for me. At the time it was romantic, I felt like I was living a fairytale. And then things changed... or perhaps the problem is that they weren’t changing.” Her eyes drop to my pregnant belly, and the muscle in her cheek twitches. “I had half a dozen miscarriages before the doctors told me to stop trying... they said I’d kill myself if I continued.”

My cheeks are wet, as if her words flipped on a switch in my brain and opened the dam. “I’m so sorry.” I profess, “I know what it’s like to struggle with infertility but I never... I’m just so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Reina purses her lips, and I wonder if she truly means it. “You wouldn’t be here if I’d been able to conceive, and we would all be the worse for it.”

“I’m still sorry.” I repeat, wanting to hug her but not trusting my ability to get out of my chair without assistance.

“I appreciate that.” Reina replies, softening slightly as she continues with her tale. “Of course, Xavier was at a loss. His greatest responsibility as King was to produce heirs and carry on his bloodline. My inability... my failure made that impossible. We were stuck. Xavier couldn’t reject me – not when I was crowned queen and not after he’d made such a fuss about choosing me in the first place, though he probably should have.” An expression of torment crosses her pretty features. “More than once over the years I’ve thought this all could have been avoided if he hadn’t rejected his fated mate. They would have produced heirs, the monarchy would never have been in threat, and his sons would have taken over when he died.”

“And we’ve reminded Reina that this was all put in motion by much greater forces than the workings of a few power-hungry shifters.” Silas chimes in, using a gentle tone that indicates they’ve discussed this many times indeed. “The God of Darkness has been at work for centuries.” Reina inhales a steadying breath as she meets Silas’s gaze, nodding in appreciation. “Well, however it came about, that was the beginning of the end for me and Xavier. All the things that had seemed so romantic when we first fell in love... all the sacrifices he made for me... they became naught but resentments. He blamed me for everything that went wrong in his life from then on, and I could see him reframing the things he once loved about me as annoyances.”

Her eyes fall shut, and I can almost feel her pain. “A couple of times when he became very drunk, I caught him looking at me with such hatred in his eyes that I actually worried he might try to kill me just to get me out of the way. It was as if I had become this insurmountable hurdle standing between him and everything he’d ever wanted...” When her lashes rise again they’re wet with tears. “He forgot he wanted me once.”

“So I did the only thing I could,” Reina shrugs, “I prayed. I’d prayed to the Goddess for all my babies, but I’d never felt so utterly desperate. It was no longer simply a matter of wanting to be a mother, it was a matter of my entire future happiness, my marriage and possibly even my survival. I’d never been so low before.” She lifts her eyes heavenward, to the open ceiling and the stars above us. “I never dreamed she would respond in person.”

“She appeared to me as if she’d been there all along – one moment I was alone and weeping, the next I was awake with this glowing being before me. It physically hurt to look at her, as if I knew I was gazing upon something I was never meant to see.” Reina’s attention turns back to me, and I’m surprised to see she’s smiling. “You look so much like her, Ella. All of the beauty but none of the pain. ”

“So what happened?” Cora asks, leaning in as if she worries Reina might stop her story here. “She asked me why I wanted a child.” Reina replies, her gaze flitting to a vast moon dial in the center of the room, checking the time. “So I told her that it was my duty, but more than that, that it was my greatest wish to be a mother. Then she asked why she should grant my wish over the thousands of other mothers in the world, and I explained that my child wouldn’t merely be for myself, but for all the united packs. My child would become King one day, and not having one meant risking a power vacuum.”

Reina pauses then, clearly getting caught up in her memories. “When she told me that she would give me a baby I thought I might faint, but my joy was only temporary. Because next the Goddess shared her own story with me, the details of our world’s creation, the peril we would all be facing one day. She explained that there was no stopping this war, but that the child I bore might allow us to survive it.” Reina recalls, “I didn’t really understand, or know what to think. It was all too surreal.”

“Then the Goddess told me that I wouldn’t get to keep you. I was so angry and outraged, I demanded to know why on earth I would torture myself carrying a baby I’d be forced to give up... Reina’s lips go very thin as she nods slowly, with the bearing of one who does not wish to remember this at all, “And that’s when she explained that Xavier took me to bed that night, it would be her child in my womb, rather than my own. I would be like a surrogate for her and the King not that he ever knew anything about it.” She shrugs as she watches me, her eyes welling over again. “In some ways it made it much easier to give you up, because you weren’t truly mine.”

I shake my head, unable to stay seated a moment longer. I manage to hoist myself out of my chair and cross to her side. The idea of anyone asking a woman who cannot have children of her own to carry theirs is a cruelty beyond imagining. I can’t find any words to express the depth of my horror and sorrow for her, so I simply wrap my arms around reina and squeeze. She gasps in surprise, but gradually returns my embrace, leaning into me.

“I tried not to love you, not to get attached.” Reina explains, weeping into my neck. “But I should have known better. Even humans fall in love with their babies before they’re born – and they aren’t bonded. I did have fun with you though, I loved being a living miracle, I held onto you as long as I possibly could. Then Silas and Pollux came to take you – I never knew where you went.” “And Xavier?” Roger interjects, “how much did he know?”

“None of it.” Reina reveals grimly. “After so many miscarriages, it came as no surprise when I told him the child didn’t survive.”

“So my father never even knew I existed?” I assess, my throat thick with emotion..

“I told him on his deathbed.” Reina shares. “We got through the next twenty-five years in a tense partnership. We were no longer lovers or even friends, but bound together by our roles as leaders. I learned to feel safe with him again, and he learned to accept reality – though it took him a few years to stop flailing in protest. He was pleased Ella... when I told him about you, he said he wished he could have met you.”

I sniff as I process this information. “Did the Goddess tell you how I’m supposed to save our future?”

“No.” Reina dashes my hopes.“That, she will have to tell you herself.”

I untangle myself from her arms.“What do you mean?”

Reina gives me a wry smile, “You didn’t think she was going to miss your homecoming, did you?”

I can only blink, still not understanding. Then Pollux stands, “she’s here.”